Brendan Carroll

The Red Cross of Gold VII:. The Wisdom of Solomon

Assassin Chronicles

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"The Wisdom of Solomon"

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by

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The Wisdom of Solomon is dedicated to everyone who has ever had the desire to work with magick.

The characters are fictional and any resemblance to real persons alive or dead is unintentional and coincidental.

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Prologue

Mark Andrew turned his head and refused to watch what was about to happen. They had been in the country for only a few hours and already they were in serious trouble. Lucio needed to learn when to keep his mouth shut! At least, he would keep it shut for a while now. At least twelve minutes or so and probably longer if Mark Andrew knew anything about anything. He had to repress the natural urge to kill them all and leave them for the vultures, but he could afford no more trouble. Lucio would have to take his lumps. To think what they had just come through, battling a horde of demon spirits and a dragon and now to see his Brother taken by these goose-stepping idiots! It was almost laughable, but not quite. Things could have been worse. He had heard of much greater atrocities being committed in the country in which they now found themselves. This was simple by comparison to the mutilations and beheadings currently rampant in the war-ridden area.

The soldier, dressed in a non-committal black uniform and carrying an automatic weapon slung over his shoulder, unceremoniously kicked the overturned cask from under the Knight of the Golden Eagle's feet and left him hanging from the limb of a dead tree on the side of a dusty road near the Ethiopian/Egyptian border. The Knight of Death had gotten lucky. He had lost the draw. They would hang Lucio as an example and he would be released to go back to whomever it was they thought had sent him to tell them what had happened and to warn them not to send anyone else. He heard Lucio's dying gasps, a few choking noises and it was over. His stomach turned over. He remembered exactly how it felt to choke to death. It was much worse than drowning and he only knew of one other instance where the Italian had 'died' and that had been in the water-filled cavern on the hillside in Texas and that hadn't really counted. He had only had to breathe the water. Perhaps the man would appreciate life a bit more now.

Mark's thoughts were interrupted when one of the soldiers holding him, hit him on the temple with the butt of his rifle and then he saw thousands of stars as he fought to maintain consciousness. He lay on the ground long enough to hear the sounds of their Rovers as they drove away and then got up slowly, dusted off his pants and went to cut Lucio down.

He laid his Brother out in the dust, crossed his feet in the Templar fashion reserved for the dead and waited for him to revive.

Lucio was extremely angry when Mark finally threw him in the back of the battered Humvee and turned around in the middle of the road to head back toward Cairo. Enough was enough! Next time they might not be so lucky. Lucio could not speak on the return trip and Mark Andrew was glad for that. It would not be possible for them to travel in Ethiopia looking for the missing girl. The country was in a state of total anarchy. All the Templars in the area had been withdrawn. They had no backup, no support, no place to go, neither refuge nor sanctuary. They could not blend in with the local populace and they had no idea where to look in the first place. It was hopeless and Lucio had to see that… but at least they had tried.

"I need to call Meredith," Mark Andrew told the Italian when he climbed into the front seat. "We should be getting back soon. I hope that you have learned a lesson, Brother."

Lucio simply glared at him. The rope burns and bruises on his neck were quite visible and looked extremely painful. They had also smacked him on the head with the rifle and blood was caked in his hair. He was terrible looking, but in general good health. No broken bones. If the fall had been from a greater height, it might have broken his neck and then Mark would have had to do his duty and finish him off. Ah, well such was fate. A broken neck was not something they could withstand normally. Without Simon there to aid them, it would have been the end of Lucius of Venetia.

Chapter One of Seventeen
Discretion shall preserve thee, understanding shall keep thee

The poor Knight of the Wisdom of Solomon was in such a state after the Healer's announcement that he would seek a wife and marry, Simon could not find it in his heart to send her home alone. In the main, he felt responsible for her distress and because he loved her and did not want to hurt her or have her mad at him. Just why she might be mad at him for wishing to fulfill a lifelong dream, a dream he had considered impossible for over seven hundred years was a Mystery to him. He had not meant to hurt her feelings and had further thought that it would make her feel better to know that he would be going off to seek his own wife rather than hanging around mooning over her. Apparently he knew less than nothing about women. In his way of thinking, she should have been happy for him and pleased that he would not be bothering her any longer about his unrequited love for her.

Simon well remembered her reaction to the news that he had fallen in love with her during their sojourn in the underworld. Could he do nothing to please her? He also remembered when he could have done nothing to displease her. When she loved him and respected him as her confessor and confidant, but all that had disappeared into the melee of emotions associated with love and hate and despair and… not her despair, his own. Brother Ramsay had a formidable task ahead of him if he intended to take her as his wife and Simon could only wonder how Lucio Dambretti had managed to hang on to her for seven years. He hoped to find a less volatile woman to share his dreams… and his bed. In fact, the Healer was somewhat afraid of Miss Meredith and the complex nature of her life within the Order of the Red Cross of Gold as the Order's only female Knight.

She was not good material for amateur lovers such as himself and he truly had no idea how he might even begin to woo her, even if he had a mind to, which he did not! If only he could make her understand that, even though he loved her dearly, he could not and would not presume to interfere in her romance with the venerable Knight of Death.

‘And I will put enmity between thee and the woman, and between thy seed and her seed; it shall bruise thy head, and thou shalt bruise his heel.’ His thoughts strayed to a verse in Genesis. He was the Serpent, the Healer. He would not bruise his Brother’s heel. Particularly not the Assassin’s heel because he knew that Mark Ramsay would certainly bruise his head if he was foolish enough to try to come between the Scot and his extremely hard-won ‘woman’. Surely Ramsay should have killed Dambretti for doing just that not once, but twice, and he would have been more than justified, but Ramsay had let the Italian go… again. What was it with Dambretti and Ramsay anyway? Did they really love and hate each to such an extent that the one nullified the other? Were they so at odds that they had actually struck some kind of karmic balance? He wondered what would happen if one of them suddenly jumped off the teeter-totter. Would the other also jump? Probably.

But Meredith… ah, Meredith. What about her? What was it that he found so attractive in her? She was beautiful, certainly. She was foreign. She talked funny and then liked to poke fun at his own accent, but she was sweet and somehow perpetually naïve. Always believing that everyone thought like she did. That if she looked hard enough, she could find the good in even the blackest heart. He had even heard her bemoan the loss of James Argonne and Hugh de Champlain, two of his former Brothers who had gone on a killing spree and killed seven Templars. Not only had they killed Templar soldiers and apprentices, the pair had tried to kill himself and Dambretti, their own Brothers of the Order’s Council of Twelve Immortal Knights and had actually succeeded in killing Ramsay at least once, and then almost killed Meredith as well. And why had they done this? Simply because Ramsay had gained permission to marry her.

She was certainly a forgiving soul. A good trait. And she had even made friends with the formidable Knight of the Apocalypse. That had taken no little talent. The gloomy German Knight softened every time she walked in the room though no one would dare notice.

Simon recalled all too clearly that Konrad von Hetz had campaigned loud and hard against her when she had first come into contact with the Order. After a strange twist of fate and destiny, von Hetz had ended up raising Meredith and Ramsay’s son for them. A strange thing to consider. And just one more thorn in Ramsay’s crown. The Healer had to smile. Crown of thorns. The only thing that James Argonne had failed to inflict on

the Scot during that terrible time. Simon, as priestly as he was, felt that James had met a just, although fatal judgment at the hands of the Order's Assassin. 'Thou shalt not kill.' A hard commandment for the Soldiers of Christ to obey.

'Thou shalt not covet thy neighbour's house, thou shalt not covet thy neighbour's wife.'

A hard commandment for the Healer to obey and a new one for him to break.

Simon squinted through the fog at the taillights in front of him. Meredith. Merry driving one of Ramsay's old Humvee's. The fog was thick enough to bead on the windshield and he had to keep his wipers on just to keep her in sight. The fog in his mind matched the Scottish weather perfectly.

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It was not the idea of Simon taking a wife that had upset Merry. It was purely selfish on her part. She didn't want him to leave… her and now she had him following her home in the thickest soup she'd seen since coming to live in Scotland. It had been unfair to him. He had been unable to resist her tears any more than Mark Ramsay. Mark could not abide her tears. Lucio Dambretti, on the other hand, had a different take on life. He was not nearly so gullible when it came to such tactics and had told her so more than once. Tears, he said, were cheap and plentiful; they tasted good, but had very little nutritional value. Even still, she had always had a hard time staying mad at the Italian. He could talk her out of any depression, any foul mood and any melancholy moment simply by saying 'Mama mia, who putta the cat in the microwave?' She had no idea what this was suppose to mean, but it had become their own little joke and never failed to bring a smile to her face. Now she would never hear him say it again and this new thought brought fresh tears to her eyes.

She didn't want things to change again. If Lucio were there right now, she would cry on his shoulder and he would cheer her up, but then, so would Mark. She hated everything at the moment and life in general that

had given her this sorry choice to make. Why couldn't Lucio, Mark and Simon be the same fellow? Just different facets of the same person.

At the moment, she just wanted something solid to cling to and Simon was the only part of her life that had remained steadfast in the past thirty years. Flip-flopping between Mark and Lucio left her breathless and torn, but Simon… he had always been there for her. He had been her friend and her priest and her confessor and she did not want to lose him. And after all the time they had spent together in what Mark called the Underworld, she felt as if he somehow belonged to her regardless of his feelings or Mark's.

Oh, of course, he didn't really belong to her. He, like herself and Mark and Lucio and the rest of the immortals, ultimately belonged to the Order. Simon was not like Mark Andrew or Lucio Dambretti, or at least he hadn't been until she had inadvertently 'fixed' him. Simon had been safe. A harbor in the storm. A buttress against the enemy. And she didn't want to share him with anyone else. Especially not another woman. Besides Simon wouldn't know what to do with a woman… a modern woman… someone who might take advantage of his good nature. Someone who might abuse or use him and then hurt him. Merry had never experienced jealousy in her life and when it suddenly confronted her on a foggy highway between Straiton and Loanhead in Mark's beloved Midlothian, her stomach lurched and she felt her face grow hot with embarrassment. What would Mark say if he could hear her thoughts? Mark Andrew was gone off with Lucio, searching for her daughter and here she was thinking these strange thoughts about another man altogether. A man that she had no business thinking of in such a manner. It was none of her business. Simon had the right to pursue happiness even if he wasn't an American. She should have been home, waiting for news from abroad. What if Mark tried to call while she was out? The thought made her press the pedal just a bit, pushing the old Hummer past the safe limits, pushing her luck.

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Simon let off the gas and then pressed the accelerator a bit more as the Hummer pulled away from him. He adjusted his fog lamps to a tighter beam and squinted into the soup. His own rental was practically brand new

with all the bells and whistles, including infrared scanning that would show any obstacles ahead as long as they were alive or giving off heat of some sort. He glanced at the GPX screen that simultaneously plotted his route and showed his surroundings in somewhat alarming clarity. A tight herd of deer or cows stood only a scant few yards from the road on his left and three people were moving around in a home or building to his immediate right, though he could see absolutely nothing in either direction. Merry's SUV was a bright green rectangle in front of him and her body a blurry red glow inside it. Behind him, just within range was a tractor-trailer rig carrying something alive in it's cargo van. Sheep or goats, perhaps, on the way home from auction. The herd on his left faded and he concentrated his attention on her taillights. Technology was all well and good and he had no problem with employing it as some of his Brothers seemed to have, but the fog and his own thoughts combined with the isolated feeling made him desperate to keep her in sight.

In an attempt to shake the willies, he thought back on the strange dinner date he had just shared with Meredith and Paddy Puffingtowne, their unexpected dinner guest. Where had the little fellow come from? He wondered if Merry had somehow arranged for the clurichaun to be there for insurance. The idea of an Irish faery having scampi and stew in one of Edinburgh's upscale establishments in full view of an unsuspecting public made him smile in spite of the current conditions. Paddy had toned down his outfit just a tad and even his mop of rowdy red hair had been neatly combed and his ever-present tam-o-shanter had been missing. After dinner, the clurichaun had bade them a splendid goodnight and sauntered off down the street, swinging a full-sized umbrella on his wrist. Strange how life had become one surprise after another. Paddy was probably already back in Kilkenny, telling his housekeeper all about the foreign food he'd consumed at grave risk to life and limb. Or… for all Simon knew, Paddy might have gone to report the dinner conversation to Mark Andrew, wherever he was. That would not be good.

Merry had made him promise to stay the night, but he would have to leave on the following morning. He had had no intention of staying with her longer than absolutely necessary. He had not thought it a particularly good idea after what Lucio had said to him on the patio in between slaying the dragon and being frightened to death by the second beast to emerge from the Abyss through a tiny rock passage in Mark's meadow. As for his

own reaction to Lucio's accusations, he had been amazed to learn just how much difference the addition of a few hormones could make in the human physiology. Lucio had picked up on the change in him almost immediately. Mark Andrew had sensed a change in him, but the Scot's reaction had been a bit more reserved.

Yep. It had taken very little time for the pack to learn that a new dog was in town. The Italian had been the first to nip at his heels, trying to establish his dominance. Simon was appalled by the changes he experienced in the manner in which his Brothers treated him. Not only was he dismayed by their treatment of him, but he was equally shaken by the way his feelings had changed in regard to them. Things that had he had always taken for granted, things that he'd always thought little about now took on new meaning and the entire world looked different. This new perspective frightened and thrilled him at the same time and made him feel extremely alive. It seemed that he had lived in a fog just like the one he was driving in for hundreds of years and had only just recently seen the glory of the sun against a clear blue sky. In general, he immensely enjoyed the sunlight.

He had opted not to tell the entire story of his experience in the land of faeries to the Order's historian, Armand de Bleu. His miraculous recovery at the hands of the elves would not appear on any official records. The elf Chieftain, Sam What-his-name, had told Mark Andrew and Lucio about the 'healing of the old wound' that he had experienced in response to Sister Meredith's botched magickal spell. He was no longer a eunuch and that made him extremely happy. He was glad and he didn't give a damn what his Brothers thought. Of course, he had to shave more often than in the past and his normally golden blonde hair had turned a bit darker, and he did have 'problems' from time to time that he had to hide, it was a small price to pay.

Mark Andrew had asked him quite bluntly if it was true that he had regained his 'manhood' as Mark referred to it and Simon had admitted the truth of it. Mark had seemed genuinely happy for him, but then Mark was certainly a man's man. It had been difficult to relate the story to Ramsay, but reluctantly, slowly, he had confessed that Meredith had attempted to use a Book of Shadows to enlist the aid of the elves when he had suffered a possibly fatal wound fighting one of the foul creatures they had encountered in the underworld. The spell had worked quite well. In fact, the elves had not only healed his poisoned wound, they had restored him completely in

every respect. The telling had not been easy. He'd never talked about what everyone had always referred to as his 'infirmity'. But his 'infirmity' had never bothered him. In fact, had he not suffered from 'it', he wouldn't be here now, driving through Midlothien in the twenty-first century. He would have been nothing more than dust in an overgrown churchyard somewhere in Southern France.

Upon hearing the entire tale, Mark had agreed that it was no one's business but his own and that as far as he was concerned it would remain off the records. Of course, neither of them had any idea what Lucio Dambretti had told the archivist in his personal debriefing or what he might have written in his report. Certainly, the Grand Master must have asked the Knight of the Golden Eagle why he had made such profane accusations against the Healer in the presence of his Brothers. All in all, Simon had doubts that the Italian would confess much of anything to the Master. Dambretti had a stubborn streak a mile long when it came to interrogations, no matter who the local 'Inquisitor' might be.

The Master knew that his son had been restored, but had asked few questions. When he had asked for permission to marry, d'Brouchart had been disappointed, but relented without much of an argument. How could he deny his own son the experience of marital bliss when he had granted it to Ramsay and Dambretti? How could he deny his own son the inevitable heartbreak when he had suffered it so many times himself? No, his father had warned him and then sent him off with his blessings, even offering to help him find a suitable girl.

Every time he thought he was making headway, he found himself right back where he had started. Mark Andrew still trusted him and that was good, but it was only because he had not confessed his true feelings for Merry to him. And hopefully, he would never have the occasion to do so. After much careful consideration, he had decided that it would not be a wise thing to do. And so now, they sat in Mark Andrew's library waiting for the phone to ring.

It was almost one in the morning and Mark Andrew had promised to call her at one o'clock sharp… local time. Mark was punctual if nothing else.

Simon sat on the hearth with a glass of wine while she sat in the recliner with her eyes closed, thinking. When the clock on the mantle struck the hour and the phone did not ring, one eyebow went up in surprise.

Mark was punctual, if nothing else. It meant nothing that he was in a worn-torn, third-world country thousands of miles and several time zones away; he would have called on time, if all was well. Merry raised her hand in which she already held the phone and looked at the darkened device in consternation. She turned it on, listened for a dial tone and then disconnected quickly. Simon looked down at the floor. He felt extremely guilty about being there with her. One thing Simon did not lack was a conscience. It was big enough for five or six people. But guilt was something he was unfamiliar with. It was not a good feeling.

At a quarter after one, Merry's shoulders sagged. He wasn't going to call. For whatever reasons, he couldn't make it. She checked the phone history and was somewhat relieved to see that she'd not missed a call. There was no message on the machine and no email on the computer.

"I'm sure he's all right, Meredith," Simon tried to console her. "The whole damned continent is crumbling. Has been for ages. Probably just couldn't get a good enough connection."

"Probably so," she nodded.

"Do you think there's any hope at all?" Simon asked her when she turned to look at him.

"That they will find Lucia? No, not in Africa. Mark hopes to find some clues to her whereabouts. My God, Simon, there is no way a child could have survived the civil wars for this long," Merry sighed and shook her head. She couldn't imagine looking for a lost child in the midst of 'chaos' as Mark had called it. She had lived in Egypt for a few years herself and had seen first hand how things worked, or didn't work, there. Life had very little value in Egypt. Ethiopia was even worse. Equatorial Africa was out of the question. The news media had even stopped sending journalists there for fear of losing them.

"How long will they search?" he asked.

"I don't know. Not too long, I think," she said and stretched her arms over her head and then smiled slightly at him. "How long will you search?"

"I don't know," he said and returned her smile. "As long as it takes."

"And that is the same answer Mark Andrew would give if I asked him. I don't want to hear it, Simon. But there is something I can do about it and I intend to try."

"There is?" he perked up a bit.

"I have the knowledge to seek for things which are lost," she murmured as if talking to herself and looked away from him. "It is a very complicated thing and takes a long time and a lot of work, but I'm going to try it. I have already received permission from Edgard with the stipulation that I also seek knowledge of the whereabouts of the Ark of the Covenant and the identity of those responsible for its loss. I'll need three people."

"Three people?" He blanched at the mention of the Ark, frowned and then turned up his wine glass to finish it off in a single gulp, almost choking on the sweet red liquid. "Just people? This is not more witchcraft?"

"No. It is part of my… Mystery," she admitted reluctantly. Speaking of the Mysteries was strictly forbidden except in extremely unusual circumstances. "I would prefer that it would be people I know. Members of the Council naturally. Others would not understand. I couldn't ask Michele to do it and I don't think John Paul would be a good candidate. It's complicated and when I say people I know, I mean people I know… people I know well. There are not many candidates to choose from. The ritual and the preparations which precede it are quite… tedious."

"Who would you ask?" he put the question hesitantly. He already knew she would ask him and he really needed to go. To get away from her for one thing and Jacques would be passing on any minute and he needed to be there. He would need to be there for the funeral services as well. There was also the matter of the Ark. He did not think it was a good idea for him to participate in the very act that would condemn him. Merry was watching him closely now.

"Mark Andrew, of course. Lucio, I suppose and… you."

Her face was very sad now. She was wondering again what Simon had been talking about in his delirium when he had been dying from the poisoned wound inflicted by the horrible creature in the Abyss. Simon had tried to confess to her that he had stolen the Ark of the Covenant from his father. Merry had attached very little importance to his confession and had attributed it to his fevered mind. "I know the three of you better than anyone else except for Michele and John Paul. I wouldn't ask Louis. I don't think he… I could handle it." If Simon were to confess such a thing now to her, tell her that he had stolen the Ark, then that would be another matter altogether, but he did not seem to remember the confession she had refused to hear in the Abyss.

"Is it that hard?" Simon's frown deepened.

"It's not hard." She looked down at her hands. "It's just sort of personal."

"Oh," Simon nodded. Personal. He could handle that. They were quite close even before they had gone to the underworld together. He owed her his life. There was no doubt. He would do whatever she asked without question and surely if she had listed Lucio among the three choices, then it couldn't be all that bad. He wanted to get up and run, but forced himself to stay put. What he had done would eventually come to light and if he had been wrong, then he would be punished. It would be up to God to decide. "Then there should be no problem. I will be here for you when you need me with the exception of Jacques'… needs, of course."

"Good," she said, greatly relieved to hear it. "I suppose the problem will be getting Lucio and Mark Andrew back here and a few other… minor things. I haven't worked them out yet, but I will. I've been thinking about this for a while, but now we need to get some rest. Your room is as you left it, Brother. I'll see you at breakfast and then I know you'll want to get back to Italy to Jacques. You really don't know how much I appreciate your presence here."

Simon stood up and held her briefly when she began to cry again. He didn't think he could handle this at all.

"I wish I could stay longer, Sister," he told her as he escorted her from the room. "But duty calls. Go on up to bed and I'll turn out the lights."

Merry nodded and started up the stairs only to freeze at the sight of John Paul walking slowly down the stairs dressed only in the black dress slacks he had worn earlier in the day.

"Oh, no, please, not now," she said under her breath. "Simon!"

Simon looked up and then let go of her.

"Stand back," he told her and dragged her away from the foot of the stairs. "Give him room. Saints preserve us. I hope he doesn't climb on anything; we won't be able to catch him."

John Paul passed without seeing them and went down the hall to the kitchen. They followed after him silently. The prophet stepped up on one of the kitchen chairs and then onto the big table. He looked up at the ceiling for a moment and then began to speak in English this time.

"He that stealeth a man and selleth him, he shall surely be put to death and they shall not escape, and their hope shall be as giving up of the ghost. Though hand join in hand, the wicked shall not be unpunished: the seed of

the righteous shall be delivered. Now set your heart and your soul to seek the Lord your God; arise therefore, and build ye the sanctuary of the Lord God, to bring the Ark of the Covenant of the Lord, and the holy vessels of God. And thou, Solomon my son, know thou the God of thy father, and serve him with a perfect heart and with a willing mind: for the Lord searcheth all hearts, and understandeth all the imaginations of the thoughts. Cursed is every one that hangeth on a tree! That whosoever would not seek the Lord God of Israel should be put to death, whether small or great, whether man or woman."

The prophecy was over. It had been short. John Paul lowered his head and seemed to look at them before closing his eyes and crumpling straight down onto the top of the table. Simon caught his head and Merry grabbed his legs to keep him from sliding onto the floor. Between the two of them, they pulled him down and man-handled him into one of the chairs. He would have bruises from their clumsy ministrations.

"I'll get Michele," Merry told Simon quickly. "You stay here with him."

Simon propped the priest in the chair, then went to get him a glass of water. He came back and placed one hand on the unconscious man's head. He could feel great pain there. A terrible headache. John Paul opened his eyes and looked up at Simon blearily. The Healer offered him the water and he drank it down.

"Uncle Simon?" He blinked and looked around the kitchen. He looked and sounded very much like the child that Simon remembered. "America? Take me with you."

"I was considering going there," Simon answered and smiled at him. It was obvious that the prophet was not fully awake. He'd not called him Uncle in ages and why on earth would he want to go to America with him? The words of the prophecy were as troublesome as ever. 'Cursed is every one that hangeth on a tree.' Now what would happen? Was he cursed? Would he be hanged now for his sins? 'The wicked shall not go unpunished.' This sounded terribly close to home. Simon needed to make his confession, but to whom?

John Paul frowned at him quizzically and then put one hand on his forehead.

"Brother," Simon spoke quickly. "I would confess my sins before I go."

"Wait a moment," John Paul told him and looked around as Merry came back with Michele in tow. Michele looked ill. There were dark circles under her eyes and her hair was a mess.

John Paul held up one hand to stay his wife when she came to help him. Michele looked puzzled.

"I need to speak to him alone," Simon told her and looked to Merry for help.

Merry nodded. "We'll wait for you in the library."

He received an angry glare from Michele, but Merry pulled her daughter-in-law down the hall, giving them their peace.

Simon had never confessed to John Paul. This was a new and frightening experience. He had never felt this way about confession before and knew that this meant he needed to confess more than ever. He shuddered to think how many times he had confessed to the Grand Master before he had known the man was his father. How the man must have smiled behind his hand at the silly sins of his son. His son, the Mystic Healer. His son, whose greatest sin had been some imagined slight he might have perpetrated upon one of his Brothers or one of the apprentices or perhaps the worst having been not a sin at all, but the remorse he had felt after some of the things he had been forced to do in the wars. His actually sins consisted mainly of thievery. He couldn't control the urge to take things that didn't belong to him. Usually small things… a locket, a flower vase, a photograph or perhaps a book or a pen, but there were other things. The Dragon's Blood had been one. Ramsay's lock of braided hair had been another. Last, but not least, he had helped steal the Ark of the Covenant from the Chapel at Glessyn. Of course that had worked out fairly well in the end and John had been a co-conspirator.

He thought back briefly on how severely he had chastised himself for not having found the time to say all his prayers or how guilty he had felt when he'd missed a service at the chapel for reasons he could not prevent. Now he really had something to confess and he was afraid to confess to the Master. His father could no longer take his confessions. It would not be right at all. But Meredith was Brother John's mother... another awkward situation. He pressed both hands against his forehead and then knelt in front of the priest. John Paul looked down at the top of his head.

"Bless me, Father, for I have sinned," he said in a very low voice. "It has been… a long time… five years, three months since my last

confession."

Before he could begin to list his sins, John Paul suddenly took him by his arms, picked him up as he stood and then placed him in the kitchen chair. Simon looked at the Priest in disbelief as he knelt before him.

"Bless me, Father, for I have sinned," John Paul spoke softly and bowed his head. Simon was flabbergasted. What was this?

"What is the nature of your sin, my Son?" Simon heard himself saying the words automatically. It had been years since he had heard John Paul's confession. He'd been a young fellow, no more than twenty or twenty-five…

John Paul looked up at him, locked eyes with him briefly and said "I have committed murder."

Simon felt his blood pressure shoot up.

It was almost three in the morning when John Paul had finally finished with his confession. Simon was shocked. He finally stopped him and told him that the list of sins he was confessing were not his own. He could not confess sins that did not belong to him. Things that had occurred years… centuries even, before he had been born. John Paul had seemed very confused and then had gone upstairs with Michele. Simon was relieved when he figured out that John Paul was not really awake during the so-called 'confession'. He seemed to be asleep still or in some sort of trance. Dreaming perhaps. But Simon was not able to make his own confession once again and now he was relieved that he had not. It would have been useless. Getting absolution from a sleeping man would have been nigh on blasphemy.

But why was John Paul now trying to confess the same sins as Mark Andrew? It didn't make sense. Simon would have to write down the prophecy before he went to bed so he could take it back to Italy to the Grand Master and Armand de Bleu for analysis. Hanging! The reference to this thing bothered him immensely. And of course the rebuilding of the tabernacle. That was something new. He had heard these scriptures before, but not from John Paul and John Paul's prophecies, though he usually used the scriptures to speak them, had always had personal meanings for them. Which of them would be rebuilding the temple in Jerusalem, he wondered.

Louis Champlain arrived just after breakfast the following morning before Simon left for Italy. The Grand Master had sent him to stay with Merry and Michele while John Paul came to Italy to see Jacques de

Plessier. John Paul had made the request before d'Brouchart had left Scotland and the Grand Master had told him to wait until he could send one of the Brothers to stay with the two women and the baby. He did not want them there alone.

Louis was quite surprised to see Brother Simon answer the door, but made no comment. He greeted him, instead him in the formal Templar fashion. Champlain was more cautious in his observations than most of his Brothers and when Simon departed less than an hour later, he felt better. He went over the records that de Bleu had recorded concerning the events experienced by Sir Ramsay, Sir Dambretti, Sir d'Ornan, Sir de Lyons and Dame Meredith and he had found nothing there that would account for Dambretti's absurd behavior on the patio after the destruction of the red serpent. To accuse Simon of Grenoble of such low behavior was unthinkable.

Louis attributed Dambretti's behavior to stress from losing his daughter in the wilds of Africa. Champlain had initiated a prayer circle for Brother Dambretti's cause before leaving for Scotland. Family matters were indeed a new experience for the members of the Council. Rumors were rampant at the Villa as the Brothers discussed Dambretti's outburst, trying to make sense out of it. But seeing Simon again, put Louis' mind at ease. At least there would be less room for gossip now. Gossip was a terrible sin and a waste of one's mind and he had no use for it personally. Things were already bad enough between Brother Ramsay and Brother Dambretti without throwing the Healer into the mix. The company of women is a dangerous thing! And then once he had made this assessment, he realized that very soon he would find himself alone in the big house with two of the so-called dangerous things! Oh well, things were strange in these times.

Sister Meredith was glad to see him and gave him a warm welcome. The other one, Michele Sinclair-Ramsay was still a bit frightened of the big, Frankish Knight, but it did not bother him. She would see that not all Frenchmen were as haughty and aloof as Sir de Lyons. He had heard about their disdain for one another. She was justified. De Lyons had always been rude and a bit tactless.

Simon had helped him settle into one of the rooms on the ground floor and had then made sure that he had all the numbers he needed to contact him in case of an emergency. Champlain had spoken briefly to John Paul

and then he had gone to see Simon off. Things should be fairly quite there. The Ark was gone. There was still some Mystery about the chapel in the oak grove, but it was nothing that Louis could not handle. Or, at least, he hoped so. Mark Andrew Ramsay had watched over the chapel for almost six hundred years without any trouble.

Louis was not worried about his assignment. Surely he could take on the task for a few days and he had brought his new golf clubs with him. He intended to make full use of Ramsay's fine meadow to practice his driving arm. He was growing quite fond of his new hobby. There should be no problems. None. None that he would allow. And if he had the slightest indication that the thing, whatever it had been, was about to re-emerge from the pits in the meadow, he would take the woman, the child and the old gardener and head straight for Edinburgh. The black storm had frightened him more than anything he had ever witnessed. It had put the specters of Christopher Stewart, Hugh de Champagne and Sir Argonne in a less frightening light. At least they had fought him with swords. The thing that had appeared in Ramsay's meadow was from a place beyond Hell and he had no doubt that Satan himself would have run from it. The Ritter had been unable to explain it to them in any satisfactory terms. The Apocalyptic Knight had not known what it was. If they were to face this thing at Armageddon…

((((((((((((<O>))))))))))))

Merry was up in her room, taking her cleansing bath when the phone call came from Mark Andrew. The luxurious odor of frankincense and myrrh accompanied her to the door to answer the insistent knocking. Mark Andrew was in such a state that Michele had no choice but to interrupt Merry's ceremony, banging on her door frantically and scaring her to death. She had opened the door clutching her bathrobe about her. Michele apologized at once and thrust the phone at her.

"Mark?" She frowned into the phone and turned her back on Michele. There was a great deal of static in the phone line.

"Merry!" he was shouting. "We'll be comin' 'ome soon. Verra soon."

"Good! Where are you?!" she had to match his timbre to be heard above the background noise.

"I'm in Cairo," he said.

"This connection's terrible, Mark. What happened?!"

"They hanged '.... 'is neck until 'e was dead! I troied to stop 'im! ... impossible!"

"Who? They hanged who?!" Merry was shocked by his words.

"Dambretti!" Mark shouted. "I told 'im t' be quoite!"

"Oh, my God! Is he all right?!" She asked.

"O' course. 'e's a tad angry with me! But we're comin' 'ome now." The static grew worse. "At least, I'm comin' 'ome. 'e can go to Hell fer oll I care."

"Hurry home, Mark! I love you!" Merry told him quickly before the connection was totally lost. "Be careful! I have another plan now. It might be better!"

"Wot did ye say?!" he asked.

"I said hurry home. I love you!" Merry shouted and then turned to look at Michele who stood staring at her, ashen-faced. The connection was broken. She had no idea if he had heard her last words.

"What happened?" Michele asked her as she punched the button on the phone. Michele did not quite approve of Merry's separation from Lucio. She liked Lucio. She did not care for John Paul's father. The very fact that they almost looked exactly alike was unnerving. She did not approve of Meredith now living in sin with Mark. It just wasn't right.

"It seems that they ran into some trouble," Merry tried not to alarm her further. Marco Niccolo was peeking out from behind her. His crystal blue eyes were wide with fear. "Marco?" Merry leaned down to smile at him. "Uncle Mark is coming home now. Isn't that wonderful?"

"Where is my papa?" Marco looked up at her frowning.

"He's coming home, too," Merry told him and then frowned up at Michele. Which papa? John Paul? Lucio?

"He's talking about John Paul," Michele told her almost coldly. "He's gone to Italy. He left right after Uncle Simon. They believe that M. du Plessier will not last another day."

"Oh. I'm sorry, sweetie, I didn't know who you were asking about," Merry said and leaned down, automatically reaching for her son. He cringed away from her. Merry straightened up slowly. It would just take

more time. That's all. "Lucio is your papa, he'll be coming home… I mean home to Italy. Perhaps you would like to go and visit him there?"

"No," Marco objected and shook his head emphatically. "I don't want to go to Italy!"

"Marco." Michele pulled the boy from behind her. "Uncle Lucio is your papa."

"No!" The boy shook his head again.

"Yes," Michele insisted gently and frowned. "John Paul is your brother."

"I don't care!" the boy said stubbornly and crossed his small arms over his chest.

Merry put one hand on Michele's arm. "Let him be, Michele. He doesn't understand. He'll come around."

"I won't!" Marco looked up at her defiantly. "I'll never understand! I don't want to understand! I want my papa!"

"Come on, Marco. Your mother is busy here."

Michele took the boy's hand and led him out of Merry's room. She glanced about at the candles burning around the room and sniffed the frankincense and myrrh. Michele did not approve of Merry's activities, but she said nothing before closing the door.

Merry went back to her bath. Mark Andrew's phone call had been good and bad. She was glad to hear from him. She was glad to hear that he was coming home, but the thing about Lucio was very distressing. Hanged! Hanged...? Hanged! She needed the rope! She ran from the room and flew down the stairs to the library and grabbed up the portable phone and the address book. She scrolled down the caller ID numbers to Mark's cell phone number and then had to try it several times before making a connection good enough to get a ringtone. Nothing. It was no wonder he was using the public phones as bad as they were. Mark Andrew had never been good with cell phones. She tried Lucio's and after several attempts, someone answered it. At first there was nothing and then Mark's voice.

"Mark Andrew!" She shouted into the phone.

"Shhh!" he told her. This connection was much better.

"Mark!" she said more softly and hurried back up the stairs. "I need the rope that Lucio was hanged with."

"Whattar ye sayin'?" Mark was shocked by her request.

"Do you have it?!" she asked urgently. "I need it! I have to have a cord from which someone was hanged from a tree."

"Merry, fer God's sake..." Mark Andrew sounded highly perturbed. "Hold on a moment." She heard a muffled sound and Mark's voice in the background speaking in Italian.

"Oll right," he said after a moment. "It's in th' 'ummer."

"Don't dare lose it!" she told him and let out a great sigh of relief. Ummer? At least one of her problems had been solved. She had been worried about that aspect of the ritual. Such things were not in common stock at the hardware store. "And Mark!"

"Aye?" he sounded tired.

"Bring Lucio with you!"

"Oh, now, Merry… lassie, be reasonable will ye…!"

She could see him shaking his head and closing his eyes and putting one hand on his hip.

"Puh-lease? It's very important!" she pleaded with him.

"Merry…" his voice took on a warning tone. "Th' mon wants t' kill me as tis. Just 'ow d'ye suggest I accomplish thot?"

"Just tell him if he wants to find his daughter any time soon, that he had best do as you and I say! Tell him that I'm invoking my right as Chevaliere in accordance with the Mysteries. He cannot refuse. If he does, I'll tell Edgard!" Merry said firmly.

"Great day in th' mornin'! Awww… I'll try," he said after a moment's pause. "But I'm not promisin' ye anything."

"I love you," she said and knew he could not or would not reply in kind. Not in front of Lucio.

"You'll pay," he said simply and the phone went dead.

Merry laid the phone on the dresser. Now she felt better. Lucio could be mad all he wanted. He was the one that had lost the baby! Let him suffer. Besides, it was about time someone besides Mark Andrew suffered. She had seen him poisoned with something akin to rat poison once and he had also drowned once, been poisoned again with mercury, been mortally wounded with his own sword, crucified, committed suicide and had been choked to death with his own hair twice just since she had known him. Not to mention the fact that he had gone off alone to fight the dragon in the Abyss which had certainly resulted in a near death experience! And she couldn't begin to count the number of times he had been decked and

slapped and beat and banged around and a lot of it on her behalf or because of her. He had taken a tumble down the stairs only a few months ago that might have killed someone else, then he'd been thrown in a pit and blown up in Never-Never Land! Let Lucio stew! She needed him here and she wanted her daughter back as much as he did.

She rushed back to the bathroom and added more hot water to the cooling water already in the tub before slipping off her robe. She waved one hand over the brass censer on the floor in front of her and then stood up to hold her hands out to her sides before kneeling on the rug. She crossed her arms over her breasts and bowed her forehead to the floor.

"O Lord God, Who art seated upon the Heavens, and Who regardest the Abysses beneath, grant unto me Thy Grace I beseech Thee, so that what I conceive in my mind I may accomplish in my work, through Thee, O God, the Sovereign Ruler of all, Who livest and reignest unto the Ages of the Ages. Amen."

She stood up again and stepped into the tub of exorcised water and began scooping it up in a brass ladle, pouring it over her head. Once she had cleansed herself completely, she got out of the tub and dressed in a white linen robe embroidered with ancient symbols in red silk. She went into the bedroom and again bowed her head to the floor.

"O Lord God Almighty, be propitious unto me a miserable sinner, for I am not worthy to raise mine eyes unto heaven, because of the iniquity of my sins and the multitude of my faults. O pitying and merciful Father, who wouldest not the death of a sinner but rather that he should turn from his wickedness and live, O God have mercy upon me and pardon all my sins; for I unworthy entreat Thee, O Father of all Creatures, Thou Who art full of mercy and of compassion, by Thy great goodness, that Thou deign to grant unto me power to see and know these Spirits which I desire to behold and to invoke to appear before me and to accomplish my will. Through Thee Who art Conqueror, and Who art Blessed unto the Ages of the Ages. Amen."

She would repeat this process again tomorrow and would repeat this same prayer once in the morning and twice before going to bed for three days. When her three 'disciples' arrived, they would also have to undergo this cleansing and time of prayers. There was much work to be done.

Chapter Two of Seventeen

To deliver thee from the way of the evil man, from the man that speaketh froward things

Marco Niccolo's birthday had been totally forgotten by everyone except Michele. She had waited patiently for three weeks for Merry to remember it and then, had finally decided that she would have to tell the boy's mother that he was suffering unnecessarily due to her neglect.

"Merry," Michele said softly and turned to her as they worked on cleaning the kitchen together after breakfast.

"Um, hmm." Merry's mind was a couple of continents away.

"You remember the day you left for Italy, for the meetings?" she asked hesitantly and Merry snapped her attention back to the present.

"Of course," she nodded.

"The day after was Marco's birthday," Michele said shortly.

Merry froze. Of course it was Marco's birthday! She had been in Italy, helping Lucio and Mark argue their case before the Council. The task had been formidable and their plan generally unpopular with the Brothers, but one by one they had come around after a week of battling it out with words. Even John Paul had been against it!

After they had finally gotten the Grand Master's blessing, there had been plans to make, data to gather and a great deal of red tape to be cut. There were passport problems, blockade problems, travel visa issues and last, but not least there was the matter of Papal approval for such an undertaking. Something that had surprised and baffled her. The very church that had brought ruin upon the Order in the fourteenth century still had fingers in the Templar pies. Meredith had returned to Scotland when she thought all the business was arranged, but the Holy See had had not seen fit to bestow the holy stamp of approval for another three weeks while Mark and Lucio languished in Italy doing nothing but getting on each other's nerves.

Still this was no excuse for having forgotten her son's birthday. Just because his twin sister was missing did not mean that his life could be put

on hold. Meredith was amazed that Marco had kept his disappointment to himself. He was certainly a remarkable little boy.

Not only did he now associate her arrival with the arrival of the dragon and terror from the beast, he could also associate her presence with neglect and indifference on an even more personal level. Tears of frustration sprang to her eyes, but she wiped them away quickly. No self pity! She would simply have to make amends.

"Oh, no," she muttered. "I'm so sorry."

"No need to apologize… to me." Michele continued to scrub at the cast iron skillet. "John Paul and I had planned a party for him that day with some of the children from the congregation. Of course, John Paul could have saved me a lot of trouble by just telling me that he would not be home in time for the celebration. The day just came and went. I'm not sure that Marco even realized that it was his birthday. He never said anything and I couldn't figure out a way to tell him, to apologize, to make him understand, so I left it alone. Anyway, he never got his party or his cake or his presents."

"My God!" Merry was truly depressed and hurt and mad at herself. How awful. What a wonderful mother she was... what a wonderful father he had. Lucio had forgotten as well. "What can we do to make it up to him?"

"I had thought that perhaps we could have a picnic on the church grounds on Sunday for him. Tomorrow. I've called some of the ladies and they were all agreeable. Of course, mass has been canceled because John Paul is gone on his... trip, but we could still have a picnic and a cake and some fun, you know?"

"Sure," Merry nodded her approval vigorously. "Of course! Have I ever told you how much I appreciate you, Michele? You have been a mother to him and he loves you. I can see that. I am eternally grateful to you. I don't know what would have happened to him if you had not been here for him. I can never repay you."

"You don't have to repay me," Michele answered but did not look at her.

Meredith sighed. She resumed her cleaning as her mind flitted around, making plans, drawing up lists of things to do and stuff they would need to make it a memorable, if late, birthday party. Her spirits began to rise in spite of her 'crime'. Time was passing so quickly and already

Midsummer's Eve had come and gone… without incident for once! They had that much to be grateful for and she was positive that Lucio and Mark would soon have news of Lucia.

Michele glanced at Meredith and wondered at the tiny smile that played about her lips. Marco's mother was not one to be kept down for long, but she, on the other hand, was fighting a terrible depression. Already, she was as old as John Paul now. Every day she looked into the mirror, inspecting her face for lines and wrinkles. Now that Merry was back, she would not be needed to raise the boy she had come to think of as her own son. She understood none of this and every minute she was away from John Paul was like an eternity escaping her. If only she had her own child! But it was too late for that. John would hear nothing of adoption. There was no hope in it. She would stay a bit longer and then she would leave. The sooner, the better most likely. Merry needed to reclaim her son and Marco needed to recognize her as his true mother. It was the will of God as Uncle Lucio had always said and only her faith in God sustained her sanity.

"We'll go over about noonish and set up some balloons and stuff and the food, you know. I can manage if you're going to be busy. I already have most of it and we have some folding chairs and tables and such. I'm going to make a cake tonight and decorate it in the morning. I'm not an expert, but it will be fun. He can help me… you can… you're welcome to help… us..." her voice trailed off.

"Of course, I'm not too busy. I'd love to help," Merry answered cheerfully. "I need to go into town then and buy him a gift. What does he need? What does he like? Do we need supplies."

"We have most everything we need. You might pick up some cups and plates, you know, the party kind. As for Marco, he likes everything," Michele said and smiled down at the pot. "He has… nothing. Just don't get him any of the popular television character themes. He wouldn't understand them. He doesn't watch the toons."

"Nothing?" Merry frowned. "What do you mean he has nothing?"

"John Paul will not allow him to play with toys," Michele admitted and looked pained at betraying John. "No fantasy games. No toys. No soldiers. Nothing. He has his books and he knows how to use the computer. I've been schooling him at home. John Paul will not allow him to attend public school or private school for that matter."

Merry was again shocked by this news. No toys?! What was childhood without toys? Blocks, cars, dolls, robots, video games, swings, bikes, skateboards? She looked around the kitchen and realized for the first time that there were no toys anywhere. None outside. None inside. None in the library. None in the hallway. None!

"That's preposterous!" Merry almost exploded. "What is he doing right now?"

"He's doing his lessons in the library; Uncle Louis is helping." Michele watched Merry tear from the room, holding her breath, waiting for the explosion.

She followed her more slowly down the hall into the library, wiping her hands on her apron. Marco looked up from the low coffee table where he was carefully writing out letters on a tablet with Louis Champlain looking over his shoulder attentively.

"Marco?" Merry knelt in front of the table.

Marco began to thump the pencil on the pad. He did not answer her and he did not smile. He seemed aggravated that she had interrupted his lessons.

"Marco, what would you like for your birthday? I know it's late, but there's still time." She smiled and reached for his hand. He withdrew it and put it under the table.

"I want my papa," he said stubbornly.

"No, I mean what would you like? A bicycle? A skateboard?" She tried again. "You know… toys."

Marco's face lit up momentarily and she almost thought she could see some resemblance to Lucio for just a moment, but then it vanished.

"Toys are not allowed," he said as he leaned back in his chair and folded his arms over his chest as if she were stupid. "I might like a sword like Papa's… only my size."

"Oh, right," Merry said, but her face fell. A sword. Where on earth would she get a sword? And where would she get a miniature version of John Paul's sword that Mark Andrew had built for him? Besides, that sword was a Sinclair-Ramsay sword. It would not exactly be proper for a Sinclair-Dambretti to own such a thing. This was going to be much more complicated than she had thought. Marco would have a very hard time understanding everything. Perhaps Mark Andrew would make him a

sword. But she would go to town all the same and try to find something suitable.

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Mark Andrew and Lucio arrived in Italy in time for Jacques de Plessier's funeral. It was a very sad affair with Simon officiating the ceremony. Lucio sat in the back of the chapel as far from everyone else as possible. When the service was over, he was the first out the door and headed for the main building. He almost made it to the sun porch before he was accosted by the Ritter von Hetz who had run to catch up with him.

"Brother!" von Hetz took his arm. "A word with you."

Lucio made a wry face. The last one he expected to stop him was the Ritter.

"You were injured in Africa?" the Ritter asked as he walked alongside him, perusing the bruises on his neck.

Lucio nodded. He had not regained his voice completely. Talking was a real pain.

"Africa is a very bad place these days. Very dangerous," von Hetz commented almost casually. "I wanted you to know that I am doing everything I can to locate the child. It is imperative that we bring her back to the fold. I do not believe she is in Africa anymore."

Lucio drew up short at this announcement and looked at the man, waiting.

"Our latest intelligence reports would indicate that there are now no European children within the areas she was last reported. Almost everyone has evacuated Ethiopia except the indigenous population and even some of them… those who can afford to… are leaving. It would be extremely hard to keep such a child concealed in such an unstable environment," von Hetz continued.

Lucio raised both eyebrows and gestured for him to go on with his hands. Apparently someone had told the Ritter that he could not speak.

"Unfortunately, we have not been able to trace her whereabouts outside the Dark Continent. The world is a very large place, Brother."

Mark Andrew caught up with them with Simon following not far behind. Lucio looked at Mark and jerked his head toward the Ritter.

"I was just telling Brother Dambretti that Africa is not the likely place to look for the child," von Hetz told Mark Andrew.

"I know that, Brother," Mark Andrew agreed. "I didn't hold out much hope of finding her in the first place, but Brother Lucio insisted." He shot the Italian a disdainful look. "We had to try to find some clues."

"And what would you suggest now?" Simon asked the Ritter from behind Mark Andrew. He did not look at Lucio.

"I believe that we should step up our search in Europe and possibly even America or Australia. Somewhere she would blend in more easily," von Hetz suggested as they stepped up onto the sun porch.

"Completely is a better word. She would most likely disappear in a crowd," Mark Andrew added and then opened the door for them. The Council table was covered with food and drinks. A strange sight. "America is very large, Brother. A small child could stay lost there a long, long time. And Europe is not much better. What with all these… European Muslims, she could be riding the same tram with us and we'd never see her face."

"That's true," von Hetz agreed as he poured himself a glass of wine and then picked up a small brown cake from one of the trays to sniff it thoughtfully before popping it in his mouth.

"Sister Meredith has a plan," Mark Andrew continued and followed suit with a glass of wine and a piece of brown bread with some kind of olive spread on it. Italian food! Olives and more olives. He cringed and then swallowed the thing whole.

"Yes," Simon nodded. He did not partake of anything, but watched as Lucio studied the selection of wines on the sideboard. The Italian would not look him in the eye. "She has asked me to participate in the ceremony."

"Ceremony?" The Ritter paused in his examination of a particularly interesting pie with dark red cherries showing through a braided crust. "What ceremony?"

"She is going to use her Mystery to find the child," Simon told him.

"That might not be wise," the Ritter commented dryly.

"Why not?" Mark Andrew asked as he helped himself to a piece of dark chocolate cake.

He checked between the layers for signs of strawberries. Barry of Sussex banged through the door noisily accompanied by de Bleu and de

Lyons. They walked around the room surveying the table. Funerals were very taxing affairs, apparently creating large appetites.

"The Mysteries are not to be used for personal gain," von Hetz reminded them and plopped a piece of the cherry pastry on a plate.

"I should think that locating the child of the prophecy would not be considered a personal gain. At least not entirely," Mark Andrew objected. His reasons for finding the child were extremely personal. He wanted Merry to be happy. That was all.

Lucio came to stand next to him with a tall glass of dark red wine. He was having a hard time swallowing just now. He was not happy to hear that Simon would be joining them in Scotland. He had made a fool of himself in front of all of them and he would be damned if he would apologize to the priest. He had seen what he had seen and heard what he had heard and by all the Saints, meant what he had said. He could not believe that Mark Andrew could not see it. Simon was in love with Merry! It was written all over his face. Surely one did not have to be a diviner of souls to see this. And what was it about Merry? Why Merry? What were they? Nothing more than a pack of cur dogs?! His face turned deep red and he was glad that he was unable to speak so that he would not say anything he would regret.

"So you were hanged, eh, Brother?" Barry asked as he scrutinized the rope burns between bites. "I was hanged once in Stratfordshire. A nasty experience. Mistaken identity!" the Knight of the Baldric laughed and Lucio cringed. It was no joking matter. "Couldn't swallow for a week. Had to have my beer given intravenously," he said, patting Lucio on the arm in his way of comforting an ill Brother.

"I should think that there would be a bit more control down there," Montague commented on the state of African politics. He had come in shortly after de Lyons. "If they keep it up, there will be no country nor countrymen left. I would hate to live in such a place. It's not bad enough that half the population is starving. They go round killing each other at random without even the slightest pang of conscience. What exactly did you do, Brother?" he directed this question at Lucio and then looked to Mark Andrew for the answer.

'Gossiping old hens!' Lucio thought as loudly as possible.

"We were in the wrong place at the wrong time," Mark Andrew said darkly; he would not tell them exactly what had happened. It had been a

routine stop. The soldiers were asking questions. Standard. Prying. Repetitive. Suspicious of everything. They did not like the looks of the Scot and the Italian and they could not give them the answers they wanted to hear. Lucio had grown angry and then belligerent and then threatening. Not a good thing to do in the face of a dozen automatic weapons. "Mistaken identity like Brother Barry said." Covering for Lucio Dambretti, the story of his life it seemed. "They thought we were spies."

Barry nodded and then laughed again as he picked up a handful of toasted almonds from a blue glass bowl and crunched them noisily, adding to Lucio's growing agitation. He loved almonds. He was hungry as hell, but he could only handle liquids well enough to eat in public.

"I see you and Brother Lucio have mended your rift," Barry commented as he eyed them closely. "It is good to see you two together again. I missed the pairing. I wish Brother Louis were here. We'd have a grand reunion in honor of Jacques' passing. He would have approved." Sir Barry raised his glass of wine solemnly. "Here's to Jacques! He was a good man and true."

Everyone raised his glass in salute of the fallen Templar, relieved at the change of subject. The tension in the room lessened as Barry went on to list Jacques' many accomplishments as an apprentice and a student under his tutelage.

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John Paul walked along the path under the ancient olive trees with the Grand Master. Edgard d'Brouchart had taken him aside when the ceremony for Jacques had ended. The priest said nothing as usual and d'Brouchart was at a loss. He still missed his second, Philip Cambrique. Sir Philip would have had something comforting to say about Jacques' passing whereas John Paul was quiet.

"Simon has learned the truth of his birth," d'Brouchart told him something he already knew. "I don't know how he is taking it thus far. I have had very little contact with him since he left Scotland. He is very much changed. I don't know exactly what happened in the Abyss, but it has

changed him profoundly. I am saddened to see it. He no longer seems to be…"

"Innocent?" John Paul surprisingly provided him the word.

"Yes! Exactly," d'Brouchart agreed and glanced at the prophet, but John Paul was looking away toward the road. "He seems to be more like the rest of them now. And his temper… He seems much more inclined to lose it than before. It must have been a terrible experience in that place."

John Paul nodded. Terrible, frightful, traumatic and wonderful, John added adjectives silently.

"I am concerned about this thing with the child. We must find her and bring her home. She is the child or at least one of the children of the prophecies. We cannot allow her to be lost!"

John Paul nodded again. It was a particularly touchy spot with him.

The child was no longer in Ethiopia. He had gone after her, intending to return her to his mother, but she had been abducted again. This time by a third and unknown party. He had lost contact with her for a while and had then found her again somewhere in America, but the images were muddled and seemed foggy as if obscured by some powerful force. He suffered this knowledge in silence. No one knew that he had been responsible for taking her in the first place. She could come home now, since things were being worked out between Sir Dambretti and his mother. But he had something else on his mind that was equally pressing.

"Your mother can find her," d'Brouchart said and glanced at him sidelong and saw him nod. "The Ritter has been unable to locate her. He was never around her long enough to make a connection as it were. She was so young… have you been keeping up with your son?" he asked suddenly and stopped in his tracks to narrow his watery blue eyes at the prophet.

John Paul stopped and raised his chin slightly to examine an ancient, gnarled limb just above their heads.

"No," he said shortly.

"And why not?" the Grand Master pressed him for more. "The Ritter has kept up with his son and I know very well that Simon is keeping up with Oriel in France."

John Paul, however, said nothing and his face grew dark with emotion.

"No," he repeated the word.

"And what of Michele?"

John Paul turned his gaze on the Master and locked eyes with him. The Grand Master cringed. He saw immediately that Michele was planning on leaving Scotland to return to America and he glimpsed the pain that John Paul felt in regard to losing her.

"I'm sorry, my son," he said quietly when John Paul looked away from him.

"An end, the end is come upon the four corners of the land," John Paul said softly, quoting the scriptures from Ezekial. "Now is the end come upon thee, and I will send mine anger upon thee, and will judge thee according to thy ways, and will recompense upon thee all thine abominations. And mine eye shall not spare thee, neither will I have pity: but I will recompense thy ways upon thee, and thine abominations shall be in the midst of thee: and ye shall know that I am the Lord. Thus saith the Lord God."

"But what abominations have you committed, my son?" D'Brouchart was shocked by his self-recriminations. "Why would God be angry with you?"

"I have sinned, my Prince," John Paul called him by the same title that Sir Cambrique had often used in private. He had used it several times since taking the Mystery of the Sumerians and Babylonians from Cambrique. "I have failed in my mission to the Order and I am in disgrace. My blood was spilled and cried out for revenge, but instead, I brought ruin upon my Brother. For that, I am being punished."

"I don't understand." The Master frowned.

"I… I don't either," John Paul told him and then turned and walked away quickly under the trees, wishing to avoid any more prying questions.

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Merry was literally tied in knots as she struggled with the brightly colored wrapping paper and ribbons for Marco Niccolo's gifts. She had wanted to buy him everything and then, when she had gotten to town, she could find nothing that was right. Her first impulse was to buy him a bicycle and then she thought it would be too ostentatious since he hardly spoke to her yet. Slow down! She reminded herself. She still could not

understand John Paul's dictum of no toys. John Paul had had lots of toys when he had been a boy. Everything! Why was he denying Marco one of the basic joys of childhood?

But he had been Marco's father for five years and she would have to be careful. The boy was already traumatized enough by her sudden appearance. She bought him a bright red and white rugby shirt and a pair of jeans. A new pair of sneakers. A Dallas Cowboy ball cap. A big notebook. Pens and markers and crayons, everything meant for fun, but not quite toys except for one small green and yellow John Deere tractor. Every child had to have a tractor. It was required in Texas where she had grown up watching the local farmers work their own kind of magic in the dirt. She had not wrapped presents in so long, she had almost forgotten how and wrapping presents had always been one of her favorite activities at Christmas and other gift-giving occasions.

She finally got the gifts done up, the card signed and stood back to survey her work. They were all due at the chapel in less than an hour. She gathered up the packages and hurried downstairs to help Michele take the cake and the party snacks out to her Rover. Soon they were headed to the chapel with Marco Niccolo bouncing happily in his booster seat in the back seat.

Merry had not given a thought to what the women of the congregation might think when they saw her again, until she drove into the parking lot of the chapel and saw two other cars already parked there. She slid out of the Rover almost reluctantly as three women came toward them. She recognized two of them, but the third was a stranger. Michele turned to her, frowning. She had forgotten this as well.

"Mrs. Ramsay!" A large woman towing a small blonde girl called to the priest's wife and Merry's heart shrank. This was the name she had always wished to be addressed as.

"Mrs. MacMurrough!" Michele greeted the woman and hugged her neck. "I'm so glad you could come." She looked down at a tiny girl who peeked from behind her mother's skirt. "Hello, Darla... sweetie. You look pretty today."

Marco Niccolo climbed out the car and took the little girl by the hand. They immediately ran off together under the oak trees to where two more children were running about shouting and hiding from each other behind the big trunks.

"You remember Mrs. Dambretti?" Michele turned to Merry.

"Of course!" Mrs. MacMurrough came to hug Merry. "My, my. It seems you have fared well to have been in prison for so many years."

Merry's mouth fell open and Michele drew in a sharp breath.

"Yes, she has. Isn't it wonderful?" Michele answered her quickly before Merry could speak. The other two women came to speak to them. "It was dreadful, just dreadful. But now she's back with us, praise be to God."

"Aye!" the big woman nodded solemnly. "I hear it's awful in Choina. Whataver made you and yer husband want to go thair?"

"Oh, Mrs. Dambretti..." the second woman hugged her tightly. "We were so glad to hear ye were back. How's Mr. Dambretti?" She looked about, as if expecting to see Lucio lurking behind the shrubbery.

"He's in Italy," Merry told her when she found her voice.

"Then he will be home soon. Good. Good. I know that little Marco will be glad to have his father home where he belongs. He must be lonely in the big house with no one to play with. We'll oll be verra glad to see the girl… what was her name? Lucy? Come on then! Just the thought o' separating the twins would have kept me home. Your devotion to God is remarkable," Mrs. MacMurrough continued her commentary as she went around to the back of the Rover where the balloons could be seen bobbing in the back of the car. "Let's get these things out and then you can tell us oll aboot the horrible heathen Choinamen and how they put you in prison fer teachin' the word of God."

Merry closed her eyes. This was going to be worse than she had expected. So this was how Michele and John Paul had explained her absence. Missionary work. Prison. In China, of all places! Merry knew nothing of China. She turned her round eyes on Michele and her daughter-in-law shrugged apologetically. And now they would expect Lucio to come home and bring Lucia Nichole with him. Merry realized that she would no longer be able to attend John Paul's church as she had before. That she would no longer be able to participate in the church dinners and the little parties the women gave from time to time for different things. That she would have to begin to live as Mark Andrew had lived for so long.

And what would John Paul do now? He could not continue to care for his flock. He was not aging, but Michele was beginning to show signs of aging with tiny lines appearing in her face and a bit of gray showing up on

her temples. These people would soon notice that there was something very strange about their priest. The full truth of her situation was coming home to her now and she was reminded of the vampire stories she had read in her youth. The whole Council was like a group of vampires living in the midst of society and yet, not really living in society, but rather living in bat caves on the fringes of civilization.

After a few hours of blundering lies, Merry was exhausted. The pretty blue and red cake was destroyed and all the presents opened. Marco was again playing under the trees with half a dozen other children near the birthday boy's age. He seemed to be happy enough, even though all of his gifts had been along the same lines as the ones she had bought for him. Educational materials, books and clothing. No toys from any of the guests and yet the only toy, Merry's sad little tractor lay discarded under the picnic table. Merry had been sitting for some minutes on the steps of the Chapel of Glessyn enjoying the sunshine. Only one man had shown up with the women and he was a tall, dark man, dressed impeccably in a pair of dark slacks and a white shirt. He reminded her of someone, but she could not place him. Mrs. Nollins had introduced him as a friend of her husband or a business associate or some such. Merry watched him as he walked about under the trees, looking as out of place as she felt. He stopped and bent to pick up something from the ground and then looked up at her. He had seen her watching him and made straight for her. She closed her eyes. The last thing she wanted was another pointless conversation about the state of the Chinese converts of which she knew nothing.

"Mrs. Dambretti."

He smiled when he drew near enough to speak. He was not from Scotland. That much was evident in his accent, though she could not place it. His smile was charming none-the-less and reminded her very much of Lucio's. "I feel a bit out of place here," he said.

He sat down on the steps a discreet distance from her and turned to watch the children playing. His words were an understatement.

"So you are the mother of the birthday boy?" He glanced up at her.

"Yes," she nodded.

"He is a fine looking young man. Not much of the father there, I would surmise," he said.

"No, not much," she admitted.

"They tell me that your husband is in… Italy?"

“Yes. Attending the funeral of a friend,” she told him. She was sorry that Lucio had missed his son’s birthday, but it was also his daughter’s birthday. They were six years old now. It was still hard to believe. But Lucio’s recent injuries would have been a bit hard to explain. Surely, he had rope burns on his neck or worse.

“I noticed that he calls Mrs. Ramsay ‘mama’,” he commented offhandedly.

“I’ve been gone for over five years. Missionary work in China,” she said lamely. She hated telling all these lies, but there was nothing else she could do under circumstances. “I suppose he is a bit confused yet.”

“I see....” he nodded and then reached into the pocket of his slacks to take out something small. He held it up in the sunlight and she drew in her breath at the sight of her wedding ring sparkling in the bright sunshine. “I found this out there.” He nodded to the trees. “It’s very nice. Would you happen to know which lady it might belong to?”

“It’s mine!” she blurted without thinking.

“Really?” he asked and smiled at her. “Well, then, here you go, Mrs. Dambretti. Such a piece must have cost a fortune.”

“I lost it in a… hurry. Yes. It is, I mean it was. That is, I mean… thank you,” she told him confusedly. She had lost the ring in the well in what she now thought of as Never-Never Land. It had slipped from her finger when a nasty little faery had tried to drag her into the well. How had it gotten here? She looked down at the ring in fascination.

The man stood up and turned to face her.

“Allow me,” he said quietly and held out his left hand. She looked up at him and he took her left hand in his. “With this ring, I thee wed,” he said and slipped the ring on her finger. She sat staring up at him in silence. “You are a most beautiful woman,” he said and let go of her hand reluctantly. “Surely your husband must miss you terribly. You have been separated from him far too long.”

Merry blinked and looked down at the ring shining on her finger.

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Lucio Dambretti was at the rear of the Mercedes digging about in his bag desperately, pulling out clothes and toiletries, scattering them all over Mark Andrew's bags and even spilling some of them on the ground behind the car. Mark Andrew stuffed his hands in the pockets of his black slacks and walked over to stand beside him, eyeing the mess he was making.

"Whattar ye doin', Brother?" he asked after a moment and Lucio looked up at him in consternation, frowning deeply in the bright afternoon sun.

"I'm looking for my ring," Dambretti's voice was barely a whisper. "It's not here."

"They took it, Brother," Mark Andrew said and shrugged slightly. He had watched from a half conscious state on the side of the rode in Ethiopia while the soldiers had rifled the hanged man's pockets. They had taken Lucio's watch, his wallet and his rings.

"What!" It was a shouted whisper. "Who?"

"The same one's as took our watches and our credit cards and all your cash," Mark Andrew told him dispassionately. "I suppose they didn't think you would be needing worldly possessions anymore where you were going."

"Santa Maria! Why didn't they take yours?" Lucio slammed his clothes back down on the leather bag and placed both hands over his face. The ring was all he had left of his marriage to Merry and now even that was gone.

Mark didn't answer. He didn't know why. He was simply glad that neither of them had carried their weapons. In fact, they had carried no weapons at all other than a few small pocket knives to avoid suspicion. It hadn't worked.

"I paid a fortune for that ring," Dambretti moaned.

"No doubt," Mark Andrew muttered and then added under his breath. "So did I." Lucio had paid much more than a fortune for the ring. His emotional losses must have been astounding.

"I had planned on using it again," he whispered, raised his chin and looked at Mark Andrew defiantly.

"Oh? How so, Brother?" Mark Andrew almost smiled at him.

"I was going to get the other one back from Merry and use them when I get married again. The sentiment remains the same. It will simply be transferred to a more deserving heart."

"Oh? And you are plannin' to marry again so soon?" Mark Andrew was shocked by this statement.

"Of course, il fratello!"

Dambretti picked up the clothes from the ground and slammed them into the trunk. He began to stuff them haphazardly back in his bag. "Lucia Simone will need a mother. I can't go about hiring strangers to look after her and I don't have a daughter-in-law, like some… people, to look after her. I intend for her to have a real family."

"And wot aboot yur son, Brother?" Mark Andrew's face went dark. The Italian never spoke of Marco Niccolo. "Doesna yur son need a real family? Or have ye completely forgotten aboot th' lad?"

"He belongs to his mother… and you," Lucio said as he slammed the trunk. "He has your name and her eyes. You should think about adoption, Brother."

"Thot's a cold thing t' say, friend," Mark Andrew lowered his voice and backed away from him. The depth of emotion in the Italian's voice made him cringe. He was not speaking out of anger now, it was something else altogether.

"No. It's not. It is simply the truth. If God wishes to punish me for my sins, I would like Him to know that He did a damned fine job. It's karma, Brother. I took her from you. Now I have to give her back. It is only fair that she have something for her trouble. You know damned well I'm more suited to handle girls than boys… children, I mean," Dambretti countered, turned and walked away across the parking lot back toward the main building. "I'm going to America as soon as things are settled and I'm going to find a fine wife."

"Why America?" Mark Andrew frowned and followed after him. Nothing good had ever happened to him in America.

"The women here have changed, Brother, in case you haven't noticed," Lucio told him when he caught up with him. "I know that there must be someone out there that would still appreciate a good husband who would take care of her. Someone who would be happy to be a wife and a mother and not some kind of superhero from faeryland."

Mark Andrew slowed his pace and let him go. They would be leaving together shortly. He didn't know how much longer he could stand to be around him without killing him. They would never make it back to Scotland without a serious disagreement. Lucio had only reluctantly agreed

to go with him and now the Italian was twice as upset, since he had learned that Simon would be going with them as well.

Lucio really believed that Simon had committed some terrible sin with Merry. Mark would not believe such a thing. No matter what had happened to Simon in the underworld, Simon would never, ever do such a thing and he could not imagine Merry taking part in such a scandal with Simon. Not Simon! Lucio was hopelessly jealous of a woman he would never have again. And who was Lucio planning to marry? Surely he knew no one suitable to bring into their circle. America? Why did it have to be America? First Merry and then Michele and now...

When he entered the Council Room at few moments after the Italian, he was shocked to see John Paul holding Lucio against the wall with one hand, leaning down into his face speaking to him in a low voice.

"Wherefore wouldst thou smite the hand of thy Brother? Wherefore wouldst thou speak ill of thy Brother who hath shielded thee and cleansed thee and tended thy wounds and kept thee safe and brought thee from the brink of death and destruction time and again? And wherefore wouldst thou accuse thy Brother of such vileness so shamelessly in the face of his Brothers?" John Paul drew back his fist and buffeted the Knight of the Golden Eagle on the side of his head before anyone in the room could react.

Ramsay dashed forward at the same time Barry of Sussex realized what was happening. They took hold of the prophet and dragged him away from Lucio as the Knight of the Golden Eagle slid down the wall, knocked half senseless from the sudden attack.

"John Paul!" Mark Andrew shouted at his son as he struggled against them, trying to get to the fallen Knight again. "Stop it!"

They managed to turn him away and shove him back to where Montague caught him and righted him. Everyone stood staring at the prophet in disbelief. The attack had been unprovoked. Simon went to kneel by Lucio, checking his head where John Paul had hit him. John Paul sat down on the floor and began to pull off his shoes and then his shirt.

"Stand back!" von Hetz said and caught Montague's arm and pulled him away from the prophet. "He is not himself."

D'Brouchart had dropped his wine glass on the floor when the attack commenced and stood watching the thing in fascination. John Paul stood up again and stepped up onto the table among the plates and bowls of food wearing only his black dress slacks. The Grand Master snapped his fingers

and several of the apprentices and students gathered in the room began to run back and forth between the table and the doors and windowsills with plates of food, clearing the table as the barefoot prophet began to walk up and down the length of the table, miraculously avoiding the dishes. Mark Andrew pulled Lucio to his feet with Simon's help and they turned to look up at John Paul. Lucio stood with one hand pressed against his head and the other on his sadly abused throat.

"In all thy ways acknowledge him, and he shall direct thy paths. Be not wise in thine own eyes: fear the Lord, and depart from evil. For whom the Lord loveth he correcteth; even as a father the son in whom he delighteth. My son, despise not the chastening of the Lord; neither be weary of his correction. She is more precious than rubies: and all the things thou canst desire are not to be compared unto her. Length of days is in her right hand; and in her left hand riches and honour. Her ways are ways of pleasantness, and all her paths are peace. She is a tree of life to them that lay hold upon her: and happy is every one that retaineth her. When thou goest, thy steps shall not be straitened; and when thou runnest, thou shalt not stumble. Take fast hold of instruction; let her not go: keep her; for she is thy life. Enter not into the path of the wicked, and go not in the way of evil men. Avoid it, pass not by it, turn from it, and pass away. For they sleep not, except they have done mischief; and their sleep is taken away, unless they cause some to fall. For they eat the bread of wickedness, and drink the wine of violence. And why wilt thou, my son, be ravished with a strange woman, and embrace the bosom of a stranger. For the ways of man are before the eyes of the Lord, and he pondereth all his goings. His own iniquities shall take the wicked himself, and he shall be holden with the cords of his sins.. He shall die without instruction; and in the greatness of his folly he shall go astray."

John Paul leapt from the table into one of the chairs and then stepped onto the floor. He turned and went out the door onto the sun porch with Mark Andrew and Simon and von Hetz close behind him. As he walked, he took off his remaining clothes until he was naked and then threw himself into the swimming pool.

"Dammit, John Paul!" Mark Andrew shouted and sat down to pull off his boots. The prophet sank to the bottom of the pool and stayed there. Von Hetz and Mark Andrew jumped into the pool at the same time and they

soon had the half-drowned prophet pulled out of the pool. They laid him out on the ground and Mark Andrew covered him with Simon's coat.

"Bring him to my quarters," the Grand Master ordered as he passed them and headed down the walk to his rooms. He was shaking his head and muttering to himself. He felt responsible for what had just occurred. He should not have upset the prophet with so many questions. Von Hetz had warned him more than once to leave John alone, but he had insisted. He would learn someday that if the prophet had anything to say, he would say it in his own good time. He did not respond well to interrogation and bullying.

Chapter Three of Seventeen
My son, hear the instruction of thy father

Meredith laid her head back on the tub and slid further down into the bubbly water, staring up at the ceiling. It would be very difficult to get past working with Lucio and no doubt with Simon as well, even though he had promised to cooperate with her. She smiled ruefully.

Simon would not like it one bit and she even wondered about Mark Andrew. But the Knight of Death, as contrary as he was, usually took things a bit more in stride than the others. She began to plan which order would be the best arrangement in which to consecrate her disciples for the ceremony. Certainly, she would wish to avoid undue problems. If she took the wrong one first, she might never get to the second or third. She thought of the three Knights she had chosen to help her, comparing their personalities mentally. Simon would be first. He would not likely come out and tell the others what had happened. Mark Andrew would be second. He would still be in shock when it was over and would not think to cause trouble before she could have Lucio consecrated. Lucio was the most likely to object and most likely to cause trouble for the others if he were to be taken first or second.

Yes. Simon, Mark and then Lucio. And further, she would have to use a protection spell to keep them from becoming visible to whatever prying eyes might be directed toward Scotland. Merry took off the wedding ring and rubbed her finger. It was itchy and red where the ring had been. She looked closely at the finger; a rash of some sort had developed there. She looked at the ring and found nothing amiss other than a tiny bur in the gold on the inside of the band where something had scratched the surface of the metal. She laid it in the carved wooden box on her dresser and took the ring Mark Andrew had given her twice before from the box and placed it on her finger. She did not want to wear the wedding ring Lucio had given her anymore and had not really missed it since losing it in the well.

Lucio had been too cruel to her. His hot words still rang in her head. His accusations and his jealous rages had done too much damage to her psyche. She did not know if she would have been able to forgive him even

if he had asked her to do so. The affectionate lover she had fallen in love with was gone and she wondered if she might not somehow be responsible for it. The thought that their marriage had come to such a terrible end made her shed one single tear and then it was over. She would not think of it again. It was too painful. She had loved him and now she wondered that she still loved him as much as she did.

When the bath and prayers were finished, she lay down on fresh, clean sheets and started the series of conjurations needed to keep Lucio in check until the ceremony was completed. She smiled sadly when she remembered how hard he had slapped her when they had participated in Louis Champlain's ceremony for placing the Stone in the Key. She would not be slapping him, but he would be just as put out by her actions now as she had been then. This thought was not in line with what she should have been thinking according the cleansing rituals and requirements for purification. She slid from the bed, crossed herself and asked for forgiveness for the vengeful thought.

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Lucia Simone sat on the edge of the dock, looking out across the green waters of the lake. The cypress trees swayed in the breeze and numerous long-legged white herons flew back and forth in the moisture-laden air above the dark waters, searching for a likely place to land where they might find good pickings. She narrowed her dark eyes and tried to imagine what it would be like to fly like one of the birds. She felt the breeze in her face, then the wind in her hair and then she opened her eyes. She was sweeping across the waters in front of her and out over the lake, down into the twisting river bottom through which the lake drained. The water passed swiftly beneath her and she swooped in on its murky depths to see great fish swimming just below the waterline and abundant smaller fish skittering away from the shadow her passing cast on the surface. She lifted her head and spied a naked branch in a dead tree. She flew up at an impossible angle and speed, defying gravity and then lit lightly on the branch. She sat on the limb preening her golden feathers and looking out across the tops of the ancient cypress trees growing out of the swampy land. The movement of a

small rodent, perhaps a rat or a rabbit below her at the edge of the water caught her eye and she leaned out to look down at it. Spreading her great wings, she lifted into the air momentarily and then fell straight down on the frightened beast below her. When she came away across the green waters again, she had a rabbit in her claws. The animal let out a terrifying screech as she flew close over the thick grasses on the other side of the river. She opened her talons, allowing the rabbit to tumble to freedom in the soft grass and it scampered away into the thick undergrowth. Lucia flew back up the river, across the small lake to the dock.

She brushed back her long, dark curls from her face and smiled.

"Lucy!" a woman's voice startled her from the shore of the lake. "Lucy, girl! You come on back here now! I told you not go out on that rickety dock. You'll fall in and drown sure enough."

Lucia got up and brushed the dirt from her shorts before running lightly across the half-rotted boards to where the tall black woman stood with her hands on her hips, frowning down at her.

"Mama Flo," Lucia laughed and then smiled her best smile up at the woman and the frown melted. Like everyone else, Mama Flo could not resist the girl's wonderful smile. "Miss Lady is sick. We need to go see her."

"Now, Lucy," Flo objected as she shook her head. "It's too far to go Miss Lady's house."

"No, it's not," Lucia pouted and then smiled again and took the woman's hand in both her small hands. "Puh-lease?"

Flo shook her head again and looked out across the lake at the golden eagle sitting high in the top of a dead tree on the opposite shore. The great bird swooped from the tree and flew toward them before veering off toward the river.

"Well, jus' maybe if we hurry, we might could get back in time to cook supper," the woman relented and allowed the little girl to drag her along the path, which led to their ramshackle house set on stilts above the muddy, flood-prone ground that Flo and her brother called home. Things had certainly changed since the gifted child had come to live with them. She would hate to see the girl go when it was time.

Miss Lady lived a good two miles down the muddy road. It wouldn't be a long trip, but the sun was awful hot and the humidity made it all the worse. "Let me get my hat, child."

Lucia waited patiently in the 'yard' with the two dogs and the old pig while the woman went into the house for her wide-brimmed straw hat adorned with a faded red bandanna. They walked along the road, or what passed for a road, carefully avoiding the ever-present mud holes, talking about the birds they saw on the way and the insects and plants they passed. Flo listened to her with abstract fascination as she called each one by its name, telling what it was good for. Where the child had learned such things was beyond the woman. She had lived in this godforsaken swamp all her life and she didn't know half the names of the plants, nor most of the birds. And bugs was just bugs for the most part except for flies, skeeters and bees.

They reached the strangely silent house of Miss Lady. Normally, the sound of gospel music could be heard day and night coming from Miss Lady's old console radio. If not the gospel, then the soaps would be playing on the tiny, black and white television even though it was too old to receive a picture. Miss Lady still listened to her 'programs' as she called them. But the lack of noise made Flo's heart flutter and her stomach turn over. Flo stepped up on the porch and knocked at the ragged screen. It banged loosely against the door frame.

"Miss Lady?" she called through the rusted screen as Lucia pressed her turned up nose against the torn metal fabric below her. No answer.

Flo hesitated. This was not good. Miss Lady was always bustling about the kitchen stove making something good to eat. There were none of the usual savory smells coming from the house either.

"Wait here, Child." Flo held out one hand to the girl and pulled open the door. The house was dark inside. Very little light filtered through the dirty, algae-encrusted windowpanes. Miss Lady was old. She was very old. In fact, Flo didn't know how old Miss Lady was nor did she know her real name. Everyone just called her Miss Lady. "Miss Lady?" she called softly and looked about the main room where a rough-cut table with two ladder-back chairs took up the middle of the space. An old couch sat against one wall with tufts of stuffing showing through worn out places on the arms. The TV with its flapping pieces of aluminum foil hanging from the antenna was dark. Flo tiptoed across the unpainted wooden floor to the curtained door leading to the bedroom. She pulled the tattered sheet that served for curtains aside and then put her hand over her mouth. "Miss Lady!"

Flo rushed into the room. Miss Lady was propped on her feather pillows. A fine line of blood trickled from one nostril and her eyelids were not quite closed all the way.

"Miss Lady?" Flo asked again, more quietly as she picked up the old woman's arm and felt for a pulse on her wrist. It was there, but very weak.

Lucia peeked through the shabby, faded curtains hanging in the doorway.

"Lucy! Go find Uncle Floyd!" She told the girl and then looked about in panic. She had no idea what was wrong with the old woman, nor what to do for her. "We'll have to get her to the doctor."

"No, Mama Flo," Lucia shook her head and frowned. "You go get Uncle Floyd. I'll stay here with her. You know I can't swim. I might fall out of the boat. You know I'm scared of the water!"

"Oh, lord, child," Flo moaned. "You can't stay here!"

"Yes, I can, Mama Flo," Lucia told her in an extremely mature voice and as she took the woman's hand and tugged on her. "Go on now. I'll stay right here and if she needs anything, I'll get it for her."

"Oh, all right, then." Flo chewed her bottom lip. Miss Lady had not stirred. They were probably too late. Miss Lady was old. She was probably having a stroke or something. "Don't go poking about in anything of Miss Lady's, you hear? She's got some real strange stuff around here."

"I won't. I promise." Lucia smiled at her and pushed her toward the door. "Now, go on, hurry."

Flo glanced around once more and rushed out the front door and down the tall rickety steps. Lucia watched her go and then turned quickly to go back into the bedroom. She walked very quietly to the bed and peered closely at the old woman.

"Santa Maria..." she said softly and used the edge of the sheet to wipe the blood from the woman's face. The eyelids fluttered briefly.

She knelt on the floor beside the bed and crossed her small arms over her chest and placed her forehead on the rough floor of the bedroom. She bowed thusly three times.

"O, Lord Almighty, God of Gods and men, Creator of all the Heavens and of earth and all things here below and all things above, hear the humble prayer of Thy servant, Lucia Simone Sinclair-Dambretti, Daughter of Lucius of Venetia and Dame Meredith Nichole Sinclair, lost child of the Poor Knights of Solomon's Temple. Lend Thy aid to her cause and look

down upon the suffering of Thy children. O, Lord of Heaven and of earth, hear my plea. Let the infirmities of my friend, May Ellen Parker, pass unto me."

There was a pause and then the little girl sat back on her heels and pressed both hands against the sides of her head and screamed before toppling onto the floor.

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John Paul did not know where he was when he sat up in the dark. He was lying on a short sofa or bed in a dimly lit room with only a soft woolen blanket between himself and sure damnation. He got up quietly and went to look out the window at the courtyard of the Villa before sighing with relief. He wrapped the blanket about him and tiptoed to the only other door adjoining the room in which he found himself. The Grand Master's bed was empty. It had not been slept in. Good. It was not too late hopefully. He looked about for his clothes, but found nothing that remotely resembled the dark suit he had worn to Jacques' funeral.

What had happened to him? He remembered walking with d'Brouchart under the olive trees and being worried about Lucia Simone and then they went to the Council Chamber to toast Jacques and then… nothing! His sleep had been disturbed by the fact that the bed, which was, indeed, a sofa, was two feet too short and there was a new nightmare. In this new atrocity, he found himself wounded and riding a horse across a desert. A terrible injury plagued his side, sending shooting pains up his ribs with every step the horse took. He had found the object of his search. A Bedouin's tent and inside the tent, the Bedouin he had come to kill. Killing the man had been no problem because he knew who he was and he knew the man had to die, but the woman! Why had he killed the woman? He could have just thrown her off when she attacked him and left, but he had killed her. And that was not all he had done to her. Why was he having these dreams?

He was convinced that he was being punished for losing the baby. His half-sister! But God had taken the child from Lucio Dambretti for a reason. There had been a purpose. Who was he to question the will of

God? He had never questioned the will of God. Had he made a mistake? It was an unnerving idea. He had to find the girl and bring her home. But now, he had to find his clothes and get himself home. What had they done with his clothes?

He stepped out on the walkway and looked about, cringing and shivering in the cool night air. There were lights in many of the windows along the porch and across the way at the barracks. It was not good to go wandering about dressed in a blanket, but what else could he do? He stayed in the shadows as much as possible and made his way up the walk to the sun porch.

The swimming pool glittered and glinted in the light of the moon. He could hear voices from within the chamber. The Knights were in counsel there. How could he go in like this? He turned back. He would have to wait for the Grand Master to show up and find out where his clothes were. As he was about to step down off the porch, he heard his name mentioned. It was the Ritter's voice.

"Brother John has been under stress, I tell you." The Ritter pounded one fist on the table in irritation. "He has many worries."

"As do we all, Brother," de Lyons answered him. "But one does not go about attacking his Brothers for no apparent reason."

"We have not heard from him," von Hetz countered and he heard a chair scrape on the marble floor.

"And if he were here, would he talk to us, Brother Hetz?" Montague put the question forward. "He doesn't seem to engage in conversation very well."

"That is surely true," de Bleu spoke up.

It was an open forum debate. What were they trying to decide? What did it have to do with him and why had he not been included in this council?

"We are getting nowhere, Brothers," d'Brouchart's voice rumbled through the half-opened windows. "Certainly, he must have been upset about the scene the Golden Eagle caused in the midst of our conflict. Brother Dambretti made some serious accusations against John's mother."

"And that is all they were," Simon d'Ornan spoke up. "Brother Lucio has always been jealous, isn't that right, Brother?" Simon did not sound angry or upset. He was merely stating a fact.

No answer. Lucio was there, but he had no voice.

"Sirs, your Grace..." Mark Andrew spoke up, breaking the ensuing silence. "On behalf of my son, I would like to point out that he is not usually given to violence. I have never seen him harm anyone or anything."

"You were not present when he cut off Sir Philip's head!" de Lyons spoke up again and d'Brouchart cleared his throat loudly.

"That was rendering a service, Brother. Not an act of violence!" the Ritter raised his voice and slammed his fist down again.

"And how do we know that?" de Lyons objected. "Brother Ramsay? Have you taken the time to see Sir Philip's body?"

More silence. Mark Andrew had not gone to the crypt as he had said he would. He did not relish the thought of opening Sir Philip's coffin to make sure he was dead. He should have done it. It was, after all, his duty.

"You see, your Grace?" de Lyons continued. "These two are swayed by their personal involvement with the prophet. He is Ramsay's son and von Hetz raised the prophet from childhood. He has two fathers here!"

"And it would seem he would need two fathers to defend him against the likes of you, Sir." Mark Andrew was angry now. "You are no better than your former Master. You would call for blood simply because he is a Scot and not an arrogant Frenchman."

"Arrogant?" de Lyon's voice rose a bit. "I think you have cornered the market on that trait, Brother. Between yourself and Brother Dambretti, there is no arrogance left for the rest of us."

"Hold, Brother Guy!" d'Brouchart interjected. "We are not calling for blood here. We are just trying to sort out what happened. The Golden Eagle has filed no charge against Brother John. What do you say, Brother?"

John Paul strained his ears to hear what Lucio was saying.

"I will not file charges, your Grace," Dambretti's voice was barely audible. "It would not be in the best interests of the Order."

"How so?" de Bleu spoke up. Mark Andrew's comments about de Lyons' heritage had obviously upset him. He was, after all, French himself and he and de Lyons had become very close. "What best interest could be preserved by allowing Sir John to ambush an unprotected man and with no visible provocation? The Rule must be preserved. Sir John has broken the Rule. If any brother, in speaking or soldiering, or in any other way commits a slight sin, he himself should willingly make known the fault to the Master, to make amends with a pure heart. And if he does not usually fail in this way let him be given a light penance, but if the fault is very serious let him

go apart from the company of the brothers so that he does not eat or drink at any table with them, but all alone; and he should submit to the mercy and judgment of the Master and Brothers, that he may be saved on the Day of Judgment," de Bleu quoted the rule.

John Paul's heart almost skipped a beat. He would be beaten to within an inch of life if they held out against him. He had broken the Rule. He did not remember it, but he had apparently done this thing.

"He had his reasons," Dambretti whispered hoarsely. "Let it be. No real harm has come of it. I will not be party to bringing such penalties on my Brother even though they may feel differently toward my own person." Lucio did not want to repeat the same process that had brought him to receive one hundred and two blows from Sir Barry's rod. He knew that he had deserved the treatment he had received from the prophet. Merry was his mother, no matter what she had done or not done, she was still his mother.

"I am concerned that he threw himself in the pool afterwards," Simon spoke up again, trying to change the subject. "I do not believe that John Paul was in his right mind. He may not even remember the incident."

"Yes, your Grace," Sir Barry agreed quickly. He did not relish the thought of using the rod on John Paul. Not John Paul! Someone else would have to do it and then they would have to use it on him for refusing to carry out the order. "I would almost think he had tried to commit suicide had it been possible."

John Paul looked down at himself and then out at the jewel-like reflections on the pool. So that's what had happened to his clothes! He'd jumped in the pool? Why?

"He knows he can't kill himself," Mark Andrew sounded less agitated now.

"You tried to do it," Barry reminded him.

"That was different," Mark Andrew answered. "I believed I could. John Paul was not acting under his own volition. When he is in that state, his actions and his words are not necessarily his own, nor does he remember them afterwards. I have not been a good father to him, but I will try to be good Brother for him. He is no different from the rest of us. We all have our crosses to bear as it were."

"Let us not beat dead horses, Brother," Montague told them. "What did you make of the words he spoke?"

He apparently addressed this question to von Hetz.

"The words he spoke to Brother Lucio were self-explanatory. I would not repeat them here," von Hetz answered. "I believe he meant exactly what he said in regard to Sir Dambretti's harsh words to Brother Simon. Brother Lucio was, after all, speaking ill of Brother John's mother. Perhaps Brother Lucio should refrain from making such commentaries in the presence of incidental parties."

A pause.

"We should all do that, Brother," Mark Andrew spoke up. "Especially concerning such things as we are speaking of here."

"Brother Lucio's accusations were preposterous!" Sir Barry slammed his big fist on the table. "I would have taken Brother Simon's part, myself, had it not been for the immediate problems we were facing at the time." Barry turned his angry glare on Dambretti and the Golden Eagle met his gaze with a challenging look. He did not care. If they all would choose to beat him one at a time, it would change nothing.

"Brother Barry," Simon addressed the Knight of the Baldric. "I appreciate your concern, but I assure you that I am quite capable of defending myself, should the need arise. God will judge me along with the rest of you."

"It is this woman thing!" de Lyons interjected again. "The company of women is a dangerous thing. We have had nothing but trouble and death and destruction since Brother Ramsay went to America and fell in with Sister Meredith. We have lost four apprentices, four Knights and how many soldiers since that time? And we have suffered many more losses and setbacks on account of Sister Meredith. And now their son is a Knight! She is a Knight! And…"

"You are a Knight because of her," d'Brouchart reminded the Frenchman, effectively cutting his raving short. "You cannot blame everything that has happened on Dame Meredith. She has done much for the Order and she held her own with the beast from the Abyss."

"With all due respect, your Grace," de Lyons lowered his voice, forcing calm. "Philipe Devereaux would have done just as well. You have personal interests in her. She did, after all, save your own son… twice, I believe. Though I'm not quite sure what that means…" he redirected his insulting insinuations to the Healer.

Another chair scraped on the floor and there was a general commotion as Simon crawled across the table after de Lyons' throat. Montague grabbed the Healer's feet and dragged him back.

"Sit down!" d'Brouchart shouted at them. And John Paul heard them settling back into their chairs. "I will not have every council meeting turned into a brawl. What has become of us? What has become of you, Simon Peter d'Ornan?! Have you changed so much that we must muzzle you like a dog?"

Simon's eyes snapped with anger and his cheeks flushed red. He leaned back in his chair and picked up his glass of wine, downing it in one long gulp.

"The company of women is a dangerous thing, sure enough," John Paul was surprised to hear the voice of his father saying this. "This is true, Brothers, but it is no more dangerous than dragons in pits and Italian dictators and Mad Arabs and the hangman's noose. If we put our head in the noose… someone will kick the bucket from under us. If we unwrap the noose, we will find that there is not a single knot in the cord and it was loose all the time. Only our weight upon it made it deadly. The noose is nothing more than a cleverly folded cord. If we use it for some other purpose, then it becomes useful, not an instrument of death. Dame Meredith is one of us and that is the way of things. There is no use arguing the point after the fact. I suggest that we get on with this… meeting so that I can get home to the company of women and fulfill my duties to Sir Philip to the satisfaction of all. For my failing, I apologize to all here present. I do not feel secure knowing that Brother Louis is there alone. John Paul will be going home and he will carry out his duties as befitting a Knight of the Temple. He should not be judged harshly for what he has done here. Would not any one of you have thought to defend the honor of your mother? Whether she be a harlot or a saint? There is still the missing child to think of. It matters not that she is Brother Dambretti's child or that she is some other's daughter. She belongs to the Order. Period. Simple!"

John Paul pulled the blanket closer around himself and hurried back down the walk to the Master's apartments and let himself inside. His father's defense of him was unexpected and gratifying. He had never known that Mark Andrew gave him much thought at all. He would need to find the child right away and he would need to be more careful about allowing his personal feelings to override his good sense whether he was

asleep or awake. He had already killed one man during one of these strange episodes and now he had attacked another. He would pray for guidance and for mercy. Michele was leaving him because of what he had done to her and she would not even tell him what it had been. Just when he had convinced her to stay, he had ruined everything. There was no doubt that God was punishing him for something. If he could just figure out what it was he had done to bring down God's wrath on his head, he could ask for forgiveness, but he was unsure of what the nature of his sin was. How could he confess what he didn't even know? And he cursed the effect of evolution that did not permit him to remember all things necessary from one incarnation to the next.

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Louis Champlain was trying to concentrate on his posture and his stance. He wiggled about, anchoring first one foot and then the other, swinging the driver back a bit and then wiggling about some more.

"What are you doing, Uncle?" Marco stood beside him, chewing on a slender stalk of grass.

"I'm practicing my swing, boy," Louis told him and then moved his left foot just a bit.

"Why?" The boy squinted off down the meadow.

"To make it better," Louis told him and made another practice swing without touching the ball on the little wooden tee.

"Better than what?" Marco looked up at him.

"Better than it was," Louis told him and swung again.

"Uncle." Marco frowned down at the ball. "I believe that, if you would lower the club just a bit, you might actually hit the ball next time."

Louis burst out laughing and stepped back away from the tee to look down at the bright-eyed boy. He reached to ruffle his curly blonde hair. "And what do you know about the great art of golf, boy?"

"Nothing. I just know a bit about physics, that's all," Marco explained patiently.

"Oh, really?" Louis handed him the club. "Give it try then."

Marco Niccolo took the club and ran his small hand down the length of the shaft before holding the club up above his head. The club was much too long, but he held it midway between the grip and the club. He stepped up to the tee, wiggled his feet and legs in a perfect imitation of the Frankish Knight and drew the club back over his shoulder. Louis was amazed when the club smacked the orange ball, lifting it effortlessly into the air and sending it far down the exact center of the meadow.

"Holy…" Louis began and then stopped. "You've been taking lessons?"

"No." Marco handed him the club and smiled up at him. He was missing one front tooth and another fat one was pushing through, making his appearance comical. "Papa wouldn't allow that."

"He wouldn't?" Louis asked. He frowned as he replaced the ball and tee and took up his position again. "Why not?"

"Because," Marco said and watched him intently. Louis swung a powerful stroke and sliced the ball. He put one hand on his hip and looked forlornly at the ball as it wobbled away from them. "He says that such things are a waste of time and that time is precious. He says that we must prepare ourselves diligently for the work we must do for God."

"He does, does he?" Louis put another ball on a tee and positioned it carefully. "Does he never say 'all work and no play makes Jack a dull boy'?"

"No, sir. Who's Jack?" Marco asked and shook his head. "He says that an idle mind is the devil's workshop and he says that toys are the work of Satan and that evil men use toys to trap young men like me in their snares. He says that God made the earth for us to enjoy and that if God wanted us to have toys, they would grow on trees."

"And when did Brother Lucio find time to tell you all this?" Louis frowned at the boy.

"I said 'papa' told me those things. Not Lucio Dambretti." Marco turned up his chin defiantly.

"Oh, excuse me." Louis' frown deepened. "Boy, have you ever rode a horse or does your papa have something against horses as well?"

"I don't think I've ever heard him mention them," Marco said thoughtfully and made a wry face. "Except of course, the four horsemen of the Apocalypse."

"And what does he say about them?" Louis tried to act casual, practicing his swing again several times before gaining enough courage to blunder again in front of the little 'physicist'.

"He says 'behold a pale horse: and his name that sat on him was Death, and Hell followed with him'," Marco quoted Revelations. "And so on."

"What do you think of that?" Louis asked him and sliced the new ball to the left.

"I saw the pale horse, Uncle, and I saw who sat on him. He lives in this house and he is sleeping with Papa's mother and he is not married to her. She is married to my sister's father and he does not live here," Marco told him matter-of-factly and Louis dropped the driver on the ground.

Champlain knelt in front of the boy and took him by the shoulders.

"Who has told you such a thing?" he asked, greatly concerned. The boy was too young for such words.

"No one."

The Frankish Knight stood up again. This was awful. The boy would be ruined without proper training.

"How would you like to ride a horse? A big horse?" Champlain smiled down at him. The boy needed something. Anything.

"Could I?" His face lit up. "Horses are not toys, are they?"

"Oh, no! Indeed not. Horses are like weapons," Champlain explained solemnly and put one arm around the boy's shoulders and started toward the house. Surely there was a riding stable somewhere nearby. "Horses are to be treated with the greatest respect. They can be your best friend or your worst enemy. Especially in battle."

"In battle? Have you been in many battles, Uncle?" Marco broke away from him and began to run backwards in front of him.

"Oh, oui! Yes. Many battles. Would you care to hear about them?" Louis' spirits picked up a bit as they headed for his car.

"Oh, oui, monsieur Oncle! We can talk all day."

Marco Niccolo turned and ran toward the car.

"Where are you two going?" Michele called as she came out the front door carrying a rug from the entry hall.

"We're going off to have a man's conversation," Marco told her brightly and climbed into Champlain's car.

"I'm going to take him for a ride," Champlain hedged a bit. A ride was a ride. Horse. Car. What was the difference?

"Be careful!" she called to them and began to shake out the rug.

Merry came out behind her carrying another bundle of rolled up floor runners.

"Where are they going?" Merry asked as she shaded her eyes against the morning sun.

"Riding," Michele shrugged. "I think Marco likes Uncle Louis."

"Everyone likes Uncle Louis," Merry nodded and then sighed. Everyone used to like Uncle Simon, but Simon had changed. "I hope they don't stay gone long. I wanted him to be here when Lucio comes back."

"Why?" Michele raised both eyebrows at her. If Marco did not seem to care for Merry, his feelings for his father were even less appropriate. She had tried to speak with him about his father to little avail.

"Lucio needs to acknowledge his son, Michele." Merry frowned at her daughter-in-law's question.

"Why? So he can drag him off to Africa and lose him, too?" Michele's voice was filled with a venom Merry did not know the soft-spoken woman possessed.

"That's not fair, Michele," Merry said softly as she shook the first of the rugs. "Lucio had no intention of losing Lucia Simone. No one would have expected such a thing."

"He should have," Michele snapped shortly. "Now, he'll drag John Paul's father all over the world looking for her and he needs to be here for his own son. If Uncle Lucio was worth his salt, he would face the facts and settle down. He still has a beautiful son. There's still time."

Merry was confused. His son? Marco? No, John Paul! She kept getting them all confused. Sometimes she even confused herself with Simon and Michele. She had even thought of Michele as Marco's mother at one point. It was very disconcerting to hear the boy call his sister-in-law 'mama' and his brother 'papa', but John Paul called his mother Sister at times and called Marco 'bubba'. She shook her head and blinked.

"Oh, you mean John Paul," Merry said inanely.

"Yes." Michele frowned at her and picked up another rug. These people were very strange. "John Paul will need him when I am gone."

"Where are you going?!" Merry dropped the rug and turned to face the younger woman.

"I can't stay here and grow old, Meredith! It wouldn't be fair to John Paul."

"That's absurd! You are part of this family. Marco loves you. He calls you mama, for pity's sake, not me."

"And that's all the more reason I should go," Michele said sadly. "He is your son, not mine. This situation confuses my mind too much, Merry. You are my friend and I can't think of you as my mother-in-law. Sir Ramsay is my father-in-law and he is a stranger to me, yet he looks so much like John Paul, it frightens me. Marco is my son and my brother-in-law. I feel like an idiot, an outsider! Or worse yet, an interloper, like I have intruded upon something very private and I have no business being here."

"No! I won't have it. I don't care if Marco never calls me mama. It's not that important." Merry was astounded. "You can't leave John Paul. You can't leave Scotland. Scotland is your home! You can't just leave. What would I do? You are the only friend I have." Merry was very close to tears now.

"Merry, please." Michele reached to pick up the rug that Merry had dropped. "Don't make it any worse. Imagine the future. I'll be old and decrepit and John Paul will be… John Paul. Just as he is now. You don't know him, Merry. You don't know him at all. And… I don't know him anymore."

Merry stood flabbergasted, watching her daughter-in-law as she carried the rugs back in the house.

She had no idea what the woman meant or what she would do if Michele left her. It was the first time she had thought about Michele's feelings concerning John Paul's Knighthood. Was she destined to lose everyone dear to her? She would have nothing left but Mark Andrew and what did they have in common? Almost nothing other than their misadventures together and a love/hate relationship in bed. She simply could not imagine living in the big house in Scotland alone with Mark Andrew.

Simon would no longer come there. Lucio certainly wouldn't visit them. John Paul would no doubt follow Michele wherever she went and the two of them would be left alone with a boy who obviously did not care to be around them. Things would fall apart. What would she do with Mark Andrew day in and day out? He would not want to travel. He would want to stay there working in his lab and she would do what? Scrub the toilet?

Plant a garden? Shake the rugs? He would never allow her to go back to Egypt to continue her studies without him and he certainly would not want to go with her. She'd heard him comment on Egypt and Africa many times. This latest episode had most surely seen to it that she would not be returning.

Chapter Four of Seventeen

My son, if thou wilt receive my words

The man sometimes referred to as the Mad Arab sat down behind his desk in his hotel suite and called for his assistant. The man, dressed in a dark suit with sunglasses and a dark blue turban, entered the room silently and brought the object he had acquired during his visit to the Chapel in Lothien, Scotland. Now that it had been properly cleansed, he could hold it without danger of injury.

The object was wrapped in black silk. Al Hafiz nodded to the man in dismissal and he was alone again. He carefully unrolled the bundle and set the golden cup in front of him in order to more closely admire the workmanship. It was a magnificent object crafted of fine, hammered gold. Its smooth surface covered by another layer of gold filigree set with tiny precious and semi-precious stones. The communion cup used by the priest at the Chapel of Glessyn. His presence was all over the thing. Al Hafiz picked it up and looked into it. He could see his own reflection in the bottom of the cup. Distorted and surreal. After turning on the desk lamp, he picked up a bottle of holy water that he had also purloined from the chapel and filled the cup almost to the brim. What better magickal equipment could he ask for? He waited for the ripples to subside and then stared into the surface of the water with his hands clasped in front of his face, his thumbs resting on his lips. One dark green eye was full of malicious intent, the other was dead, glassy.

He saw the face of the priest clearly and saw that he was in turmoil. Good. That was exactly how it should be. He could not see the thoughts of this one even when he was in close proximity. He had tried it on several occasions. The magick was too powerful in the prophet's mind, but though he could not receive he could send things to him. He had been skillfully sending things to him for quite some time.

The priest's father had a very colorful past. In fact, al Hafiz al Sajek had been immensely shocked when he had looked into Ramsay's mind at the chapel before he taken Semiramis away. He had not seen him in ages and he had grossly underestimated his foe. In fact, al Hafiz had never

expected to see him again. Though his powers were somehow diminished, he was still powerful enough to cause concern. He had known of his existence, but he'd had no idea that the Knight of Death was the same Templar he had met in Jerusalem. It was such a small world in which they subsisted in their various incarnations.

It was no wonder that Mark Ramsay had almost defeated him at the pit in Florida. It was no wonder that Ramsay had been able to stop him in the garden of the Hesperides when they had taken on the form of the dragons and it was no wonder that Ramsay's sword had cut him when he had taken it so foolishly in hand. He glanced down at the hideous scar left by the sword across his left palm. But Ramsay had all but ceased practicing his magick other than his alchemical work. At least none he could detect. He simply did the things he did because he was 'divinely inspired' according to the way of the Templars. He did no conjuring, no invocations. His entire repertoire of scripture and knowledge consisted of a few prayers he used in his ceremonies. But this one, Ramsay's son, the one they called John Paul. Now here was a formidable enemy. A dangerous man. And a perplexing creature all the same. On the one hand, the man was like a child and on the other like a master magician, sorcerer and perhaps even equal to himself in some respects. He could be reached and touched physically and metaphysically. If nothing else, he could be followed and observed. Al Hafiz might not be able to discern his thoughts, but he could discern his actions.

He saw the prophet wandering alone, down a long dark, open-air walkway with only a blanket wrapped about him. An unusual occurrence for the man no doubt. He entered a doorway set into the wall and paused, looking about as if searching for something. After a moment, he went to kneel by a small couch and bowed his head in prayer to his god. Something was troubling the prophet immensely and al Hafiz smiled. No doubt the dreams he had sent him were tormenting him. Most likely, he could not understand them. They would seem to be his dreams, but they were the dreams, or possibly memories, of his father, Mark Ramsay. Dreadful remembrances. Certainly the stuff of nightmares. Al Hafiz smiled at his own cleverness. Mark Ramsay was everything that his son was not. The prophet was innocent and yet he now asked forgiveness for things he had not done. Good! The man would make mistakes now. Question himself. Question his god. Question his life. Confusion and chaos. It had stood him

in good stead when the two Knights had gone to Ethiopia in search of the child. Always a good combination.

Al Hafiz leaned back in his chair and reflected on his most recent encounter with Semiramis at the Chapel. She was as beautiful as ever and his sway over her still held. She had said nothing when he had slipped the ring on her finger. Nothing had changed. She did not know him. Did not recognize him and that was good. He pulled out a drawer on the desk and took out a small wooden cup, roughly hewn and put it under his nose, inhaling the aroma. This was her cup from the underworld. The one she had used to drink her milk and her wine. He could smell her fine fragrance on it and when he closed his eyes he could see her face, but there were also remnants of the other priest there. The priest had always used this cup to serve her apparently because it had roses carved around the rim and his scent was on it as well. Most displeasing. That was a shame, but it had its uses. He could use the cup to see either of them or both. He filled it with consecrated water and set it under the lamp.

She was in her bath now, saying some sort of prayer. Al Hafiz frowned. What was she up to? Her magick was very strong, causing the water to ripple gently around her. He had seen examples of it before. All she needed was practice and she would be very powerful. He listened to her voice in his head without hearing the meanings of her words. Such a wonderful thing to hear her voice again. He could have listened to her all night, but he changed his expression and his concentration and focused on the other presence in the cup.

"I will not abide this on-going distemper," Mark Ramsay's voice came to his ears. The blonde priest called Simon of Grenoble was with his Brother. "You and Lucio will have to call a truce, Brother. I won't have you destroying my home in front of my eyes. I have suffered enough already and I deserve at least a semblance of peace for a few days."

"I would not be the one to speak to, Brother," the priest answered him. They were sitting in the dark. There was a large pond or fountain nearby. The sorcerer could hear the water. "Brother Lucio's mind is given to imaginations based on his own experiences and his own guilt. He accuses me of the same thing he did to you. Does that surprise you? And I believe that not only does he think I am willing and now capable of carrying out such a thing, he would wish that I had."

"How so?" Mark Ramsay's voice was full of surprise.

"Because he has lost her and he does not want you to have her. Simple," the priest told him. "He would rather anyone have her but you. Though he would hate me as well if that were the case. But I have made peace with myself and I assume that you and I are at peace concerning this issue. I am attempting to put the thing behind me though I would come clean with you and say that I love her more than I should."

"I have every faith in you, Brother, but I would ask your forgiveness on one account," Mark Ramsay's voice was much lower now.

"And what would that be?"

"I did have such a thought when I saw you with her at the cottage," Ramsay admitted. "It did not seem right… you and Merry sharing the same bed. It was a shocking sight, but there was nothing there. I would have done the same thing. I would have been very reluctant to let her out of my sight in such a strange place. And then when Sam told us that you and she had been there for 'ages' and that you were… that you had been cured… well, I have to admit to you, Brother, that I had another thought, but it is nothing now. I would ask your forgiveness."

"It is understandable," Simon said evasively and looked away from the Knight of Death.

It would not be possible to look him in the eyes. He would know, but a sin was a sin even if it was only in the mind and Simon was overwhelmed with guilt. "I would never hold it against you and I would hope that you would never hold anything against me, Brother. I would not fault you for your thoughts. Controlling thoughts is almost impossible. I did my best and have done my best and I intend to continue to do so, though I have less experience with such things as most. All I ask is that you would make every effort to make her happy for a while, at least, if you can. She has a great burden to bear with the loss of her daughter though she does not speak of it as often as you might expect. I believe she has buried it along with many other things. Take care of her."

"I intend to. That is why I would ask that you and Lucio try to maintain at least some semblance of civility until this thing is over. Whatever it is. I suppose it won't hurt to try and maybe she can shed some light on the whereabouts of the girl. If we can get her back, then I believe that much of what troubles Sister Meredith will be lifted and we can get on with our lives… such as they are."

Mark Andrew frowned and looked around the courtyard. They were sitting very near the grotto. The place usually had a calming effect on him and when he was forced to remain in Italy for any length of time, he often came to sit in the relatively secluded little garden to listen to the sound of the running water in the fountain. The pool was clear and cold and staring into it's surface was good therapy for clearing the mind. Tonight, however, something did not feel right. As they talked, chills coursed up his spine from time to time and he had the distinct feeling that someone or perhaps something was watching them. For a fleeting minute, he thought perhaps the Italian might be hiding behind the statue of the Blessed Mother, watching and listening to them. "I wonder where he has gotten off to now? It's time for us to leave. You will be coming tomorrow then?"

"Yes. Tomorrow evening. Late," Simon answered as he stood up. He needed to talk to the Grand Master.

Al Sajek drew back from his scrying. The priest was still troubled over the identity of his father. This was interesting. His father was a great sorcerer and magician. Surely, the priest should have been glad to have learned that he had sprung from such greatness. But it was not just his lineage bothering him. There was another problem. It made the magician's blood boil. How dare he presume to be in love with Semiramis? He could understand the other two, but this one made him want to cripple, maim and kill someone. And he, al Hafiz the Great, had been so foolish! At this late stage it was hard to believe he was still capable of making such grave blunders. Now the priest was attached to her as well as the Knight of Death and the Knight of the Golden Eagle and even the Grand Master held a fondness for her above and beyond what should be, simply because of her treatment of his precious son. D'Brouchart thought of her as a daughter rather than a sister. That was another entanglement he had not seen coming. But he could not fault himself too severely. He had underestimated a great deal lately. He would try not to be so careless in the future.

He looked into the cup again, sensing that there was something more, something he was missing. The Red Elixir. How had he missed this? The Healer knew the secrets of the elusive Dragon's Blood. Incredible! He, al Hafiz al Sajek, had been searching for this knowledge for countless years. And now here it was for the taking. But how would he be able to duplicate such a thing? Surely, there had to be a way to do it. If it could be done

once, it could be done twice. He delved deeper into the mind of the priest. The Healer was having some very disturbing thoughts about Semiramis. He said one thing, but thought another. Unseemly behavior for a so-called man of God! He would have to watch this one even more carefully than he had at first imagined.

((((((((((((<O>))))))))))))

Florence Trahan and her brother Floyd carried the unconscious child back to their modest home, which was a sort of tumble-down patchwork of rooms built at different times from different materials by any number of different 'architects' and 'artisans'. The house had no perceivable design, but served its purpose, providing shelter from the wind and rain and the various pests and other denizens living in the seemingly endless swamp. They took her inside and put her to bed. Flo was beside herself with self-doubt for having left the child with Miss Lady, but Miss Lady had taken care of her quite well. The tale the old woman told was unbelievable. The child was... truly gifted. Even moreso than Flo had at first thought. She had seen her talking to the animals and saw her watching the sky and had overheard her saying many strange and wonderful things to invisible ears. Perhaps God had sent her to them. Floyd argued that the girl was 'touched' in a somewhat less flattering manner. Flo intended to find out which god had sent her and who she was. There would be time to learn next Saturday. She tucked the girl under the quilt and stood back to look down at her.

"Brother..." Flo turned to her twin brother who stood frowning next to her. "This child is special."

"I can see that, Flo," he answered in his deep voice. "But why is she here with us?"

"I intend to find out, brother."

Flo picked up the child's dirty clothes from the floor and left the room. Floyd could hear his sister singing a song in a strange mixture of French, African and English as she went about her work in the kitchen. He went back and sat for a long time watching the little girl sleep. He hoped that she would not bring ill-fortune on their tiny family. He did not trust the world in general and he did not like having this child here. No matter how

much money he was being paid to keep her. He did not trust the man who had brought Lucy to them. He was afraid they would end up in prison or worse for aiding a kidnapper. Surely the man could not have truly been her father as he had said. Floyd just wanted to make a little money and he didn't think that keeping the girl had sounded like a bad deal. But the man had told him that he just wanted a place to hide her out for a while until he could get legal custody of her. Floyd knew nothing of such things. Courts, judges and laws were something Floyd avoided. Divorces and litigation were completely beyond his reckoning. It seemed to him that folks that got married and had children ought to stay married and raise the kids until they were grown before they split the sheet. But he and his sister and their neighbors lived out in the middle of nowhere. Nobody would come out here looking for the girl.

The money was just so good. And it would only be for a little while…

When he was sure that she was sleeping peacefully, he got up, stuck his hands in the pockets of his jeans and wandered out to the kitchen.

"What's for supper, Flo?" he asked and went to look in one of the big, cast iron pots on the wood stove and she slapped his hand with the back of a wooden spoon.

"Stay out'n the pots, Floyd!" she told him good-naturedly.

((((((((((((<O>))))))))))))

Simon d'Ornan shook his head and blinked his eyes rapidly. Something was not right. He looked around the tiled area between the sunporch and the pool. All was quiet. The lights were out in all the Knight's quarters and only here and there were the dim lights of the small sconces that burned along the walks and outside the rooms of the occupants. He had the strange feeling that he was being watched, but attributed it to the lingering paranoia he felt from his long stay in the underworld where something always seemed to be watching from the trees, from the grass, from the water, from the well… he glanced toward the grotto and thought he saw a fleeting shadow there. He shivered in the cool night air and stuffed his hands in his pockets. The Grand Master would be

waiting for him. He could see the light in d'Brouchart's study. The only light remaining on in the building where the Knights lived.

At least he had learned something of use that eased his mind a bit. The hanged man was not to be himself. The hanged man was Lucio Dambretti, but the Hanged Man symbolized change in Tarot. Just as John Paul had prophesied, Lucio had returned from Africa with rope burns on his neck and the unsettling report that he had been hanged at a remote checkpoint near Ethiopia's northern border by a group of radical militants in black BDU's claiming to be representatives of one of an unspecified government agency in charge of the war-torn country. Simon had to assume that most of the prophecy dealt with Lucio's abduction of the baby Lucia and how he would be punished for that mistake.

He stopped in front of the door and knocked lightly on the doorjamb.

"Come in!" d'Brouchart's answered immediately.

Simon stepped inside and the Grand Master looked up at him over his reading glasses. He held a sheaf of yellowed papers in his big hands.

"Sir," Simon nodded to him and he waved one hand at the chair in front of his desk. Simon took the chair, leaned back and crossed his legs in the usual pose he took when he sat in the chair. He had sat there almost as much as Sir Philip ever had, but it had been a long time since the last time he had come here. Many things had changed.

"Look at this," d'Brouchart said abruptly and laid the pages down, spinning them around for him to see. Simon leaned forward to pick up the papers and looked at them under the light.

"A crow, a golden eagle, a serpent and a Star of David, the seal of Solomon," Simon read off the names of the emblems in the illustration at the top of the page. "Interesting."

"Yes, it is," d'Brouchart agreed. "Sir Philip was studying this just before we went to Scotland. It is another piece of alchemical Arcana called the 'War of the Knights'. Seems fitting just now, doesn't it?"

"Yes," Simon nodded. The crow, Mark Andrew. The golden eagle, Lucio Dambretti. The serpent, Simon d'Ornan. Certainly the seal of Solomon referred to Sister Meredith as she was now the Knight of the Wisdom of Solomon. Who was the Star of David? "It's very strange that none of us noticed these… connections between the Arcanum and the Council of Twelve until only recently. It makes one wonder which came first, the chicken or the egg. Inexcusable."

"This piece was written by Johan Sternhals, the Bishop of Bamberg in Hamburg, in the year of our Lord, 1680," he read from the top of the paper. "It is supposed to refer to some methods and techniques for making gold, but it seems fraught with references to members of this Council. Sir Philip had only just begun to read and cipher it…" d'Brouchart's voice trailed off as he thought again about how much he missed Philip Cambrique. He still could not believe the man was gone. "I would have you take it to Scotland with you and give it over to Ramsay and Dambretti for study. I would like to know if they might be able to shed some light on its meaning in relationship to the events that we have seen transpiring of late. It may mean nothing at all, but one never knows."

"I will see to it that they have it, your Grace," Simon muttered as he looked over the papers, scanning quickly down the page and going to the next. Iron, gold, mercury, silver. Gold, Golden Eagle? Mercury, Mark Andrew? Iron? Silver, Luna, Sister Meredith. Iron? It was very confusing to the Healer. He was not an alchemist, though he had messed about in Mark Andrew's Art for a time out of curiosity.

D'Brouchart folded the remaining sheets in half and stuffed them in a brown envelope before handing them to Simon. Simon shoved the other pages in the envelope before sitting back with a peculiar look on his face.

"Father?" he asked and then seemed to be waiting to see what affect this simple word would have on the Grand Master.

D'Brouchart raised both eyebrows, but said nothing.

"Does my father have nothing to say to his son?" Simon asked after a moment's silence.

"My son's father would say that his son should say what is on his mind and ask his father what it is that he wants to know," d'Brouchart answered solemnly.

"My father's son would wish to know who his mother was."

Simon smiled slightly. So the Old Man wanted to play games...

"My son's mother was a beautiful girl. A young woman who stole his father's heart with one glance. His mother belonged to another man. My son's mother came to his father for protection and sanctuary. My son's father made a grave error and was lost. Before his father could rectify the situation, his mother was dead. His father has grieved his son's mother's loss ever since. My son's father has offered many prayers to the Lord God for his son's mother's salvation and has asked that any punishment reserved

for my son's mother might be delivered upon his father's head rather than his mother's head. My son's father believes that his prayers have been answered and that my son's mother has been exonerated of any sin regarding the birth of her son. My son is the image of his mother and reminds his father of her every time his father lays eyes on him. This, too, is part of my son's father's penance. To be reminded of his mother's beauty and the loss that his father has endured." The Grand Master leaned back in the chair and placed both hands on his stomach to gaze at Simon thoughtfully. "Does that answer your question, my son?"

"Perhaps." Simon did not blink, did not flinch away from his father's gaze.

"My son's father loves his son more than life. My son's father would give his own life for the life of his son."

Simon nodded. This was the answer he wanted to hear for the question he did not ask. He would need his father's support for what he was planning to do.

"Would my father have any paternal advice for his son?" Simon asked after another moment of silence.

"My son's father would advise his son to be careful not to hide too much from his father. My son's father would ask for his son's forgiveness for having hidden much from him and my son's father would ask his son not to make the same mistakes his father has made."

D'Brouchart lowered his head and looked at his son with an expectant look. There was something on Simon's mind and he had yet to actually say what it was. The identity of his mother actually mattered very little after so long.

"Would my father condemn his son to death if the need arose?" Simon asked him. "Would my father offer his son upon the altar as Abraham offered Isaac?"

The Grand Master blinked at him slowly and removed his hands from his stomach to lean forward, propping his elbows on the desk.

"What has my son done that would bring about such condemnation from his father?" he asked carefully. A hundred terrifying thoughts ran through his mind.

"Did Isaac bring about his own condemnation?" Simon raised one eyebrow. "Isaac was an obedient son and even carried the firewood to his own funeral pyre. Had not God intervened, Isaac would have been slain

and his body burned upon the altar. But we can only assume that Abraham would have carried through with the command God made of him to sacrifice his son. Is God so cruel? What was Abraham's sin that brought on such torment from the God he served so well and so long?"

"You have forgotten about Job, Simon," d'Brouchart said and leaned back in his chair. "The same God of Abraham was also the God of Job. No man has suffered more than Job and still loved God."

"But Job called God down and demanded an explanation," Simon shrugged. "Job was a very brave man, Father. Are you as brave as Job? Are you as strong as Abraham? Am I as obedient as Isaac? Would you call God to answer?"

"That is a question that I cannot answer. I am but a poor Knight of Solomon's Temple. I serve God. God does not serve me. I have always served God. I have erred because I am but a man like any other. And I, like any other man, will pay the price for my sins. But I have not suffered as Job and I have not been tested as Abraham. I will not try to imagine what I might do if I found myself in their shoes."

Simon nodded again. That seemed to be a fair answer.

"Does my son have any more questions for his father?" d'Brouchart asked when it appeared that Simon was about to stand up.

"Did my father murder the husband of his son's mother before or after his son was conceived?"

D'Brouchart stood suddenly, sending his chair backwards into the wall behind him. His face became ashen and he blinked rapidly at his son.

"You dare accuse me of murder?"

He leaned on the desk.

"I dare nothing. I only asked a question. Before or after? Simple."

Simon stood up to face him across the desk. "Would you dare deny it?"

"After."

D'Brouchart sat back down heavily in the chair.

Simon nodded curtly to him, turned on his heel and walked out of the small room, leaving the door open.

"Like father, like son," d'Brouchart said softly as he sat staring after him. "What have you got on your mind, my son?"

((((((((((((<O>))))))))))))

Mark Andrew opened the door of his house quietly and stepped inside the darkened entry hall. He stood back and waited for Lucio to come inside. The Italian carried his black leather bag and another misshapen clothes bag slung over one shoulder. He paused and looked about as if he expected a greeting from someone, but no one was there to greet them. It was clear that he had never intended to return to Scotland, never intended to darken Ramsay's door again. Everyone was asleep. It was, after all, two in the morning and Mark Andrew had opted not tell Merry what time they would be there. He didn't want her to wait up for him simply because Dambretti would be with him and he wanted to avoid any trouble.

"Where is everyone?" Lucio asked. His voice was better, but now he had a new, rather ugly bruise on the side of his face just in front of his left ear where John Paul had hit him.

"It's two o'clock in the morning," Mark shrugged an explanation. "They're probably sleeping as would seem fit at this hour."

Then another thought occurred to him. He had been sleeping in Merry's room with her since Lucio's departure. Something else that would be a bit improper with her husband in the house. Damn it! Why had she insisted on bringing him back here? Surely she could have found some way to do whatever it was she needed to do without him, but then there was the matter of the hangman's rope. A strange request. Perhaps she also had to have the hanged man. An auspicious card in the Tarot deck, but this was not Tarot. He shook his head and now wished that he had won the draw. He could have brought his own noose home and left Lucio in Italy. It would have been worth dying for. A little peace. A little time. But it was too late now.

"Your room is where you left it," he announced. "No one's done anything to it."

Lucio nodded and started up the stairs.

"Andy, me boy!" A familiar voice rang out in the hall.

Mark Andrew dropped his bags on the floor and turned to see Paddy Puffingtowne hurrying up the hallway from the kitchen with his pipe clenched between his teeth and a silver tankard in one hand.

"Paddy!" Mark smiled and went to hug the little fellow, lifting him from the floor briefly. "This is quite a surprise! When did you get back, my friend?"

"Wotch th' clothes, Andy!" Paddy was put out by the over-enthusiastic greeting, but he was obviously pleased.

Mark put him down on the floor and he tugged indignantly at his blue plaid coat.

"Lucky!" The clurichaun looked up at Lucio who stood on the stairs, frowning at him. "Had a bit o' tribble down in th' Dark Continent, did ye?"

"Aye," Lucio nodded and then added "Si." He didn't want to like the little fellow, but it was hard not to.

"Ye brot th' rope?" Paddy asked and narrowed his eyes as he took the pipe from his teeth.

"I did," Lucio affirmed and raised one eyebrow.

"Good!" Paddy turned to Mark Andrew. "I tell ye Andy, it's been a terrible long toime since I laid eyes on ye and ye look as good as ever. Like a new born lamb."

"A new born lamb?" Mark Andrew frowned. He would never have described himself in such terms.

"Aye. Wild and wooly!" Paddy laughed and then turned up his chin a bit and took a long pull off his tankard. "I've been checkin' yer stock and ye're a moight low on beer, but don't ye be worryin' yer head over't. I'll just let you two get on t'bed. Ye look toired. I'll see ye booth in th' marnin'."

Mark Andrew nodded and picked up his bags. Paddy started down the hall and Lucio continued up the stairs. When the Italian reached the top of the stairs, Paddy came hurrying back to catch up with Mark.

"I woudna want t'be getting' into yer business, Andy, but if I were you, I'd stay down here tonoight." Paddy glanced up the stairs where Lucio had disappeared.

Mark Andrew sighed and then frowned. All he wanted to do was go up to his room and go to bed.

"C'mon, Andy. There's not much left o' th' noight t' speak of," Paddy pleaded and tugged on his arm. "Bring yer things into th' library and I'll sing ye t' sleep."

Mark Andrew smiled and then laughed. He couldn't imagine going to sleep with Paddy crooning to him.

"Ye're right," he nodded and walked back down the stairs. "I'll stay down here tonight, but no singing."

"Oll right then," Paddy nodded. "There's olways tomorrow noight, ye know."

Paddy held the library doors open for him and he went in to find the wolfhounds sleeping on the hearth. They barely moved when he came in. Paddy closed the doors quietly and left him to his couch.

Lucio went to his room on the second floor of Mark Ramsay's home. He felt extremely odd when he entered the room. Some of his stuff was still there. He had never moved everything to their... her room. Most of it was his Egyptian stuff and he had not seen it in a long, long time. He wandered about the room picking up the priceless artifacts he had collected on his travels in North Africa over the centuries. It was not possible to come by these things so easily in this day and age. Small, intricately carved and painted statues and statuettes. Golden images of Horus. Ebony carvings of the Jackal God. An ivory and tortoiseshell inlaid cup. An alabaster cosmetic jar with an image of Isis carved into the lid. A wooden bust of Ramses the Great overlaid with turquoise, lapis lazuli and gold. All taken from the tombs in the Valley of the Kings. He pulled his clothes from his leather bag and the blood-stained rope he had been hanged with fell to the floor. He bent to pick it up gingerly and then unwound the noose. He looked at the cut end where Ramsay had cut him down with a utility knife. Ramsay to the rescue again! Did it never end? And what had Ramsay said about the noose? It was true. The noose had no knots in it whatsoever. It was just a cleverly wound cord. Simple and deadly.

He looked around the room and shuddered. He started to close the door, changed his mind and made his way down the hall to Merry's room. The door to Mark Andrew's old room was closed. That was where Michele and John Paul lived now. A dim light shone under the door of Christopher Stewart's old bedroom. Marco Niccolo's room now. No other lights showed in the hall. Where had Mark Andrew gone? He kicked himself mentally for not having waited to see where his Brother had gone to spend what was left of the night. Was he in Merry's room? She was technically still his wife. He had the right to knock on her door. Mark Andrew did not have the right to be there… yet.

Lucio knocked lightly on the door that he and Merry had shared blissfully for seven glorious years and waited.

Merry opened the door cautiously and blinked at him. She wore a white linen robe embroidered with strange symbols in dark red thread.

"I brought you what you asked for."

He held up the rope in front of her, his voice was low and very hoarse. She could see the purplish red mark that angled up from left to right on his neck and she had the urge to hug him and tell him that she was sorry for what had happened to him. Almost.

"Lucio?" She quickly looked up and down the hall. "When did you get here?"

"Just right now," he said and looked up at the ceiling. "I didn't disturb you all, did I?"

"Not much, not really." She smiled slightly and reached to take the rope from him. She retreated into her room, leaving the door open. Lucio leaned inside the door frame just far enough to see that she was alone. The bed was rumpled, but she was alone. She switched on the lamp on the dresser and frowned down at the rope. It was made of plain brown fibers, twisted and rough. Dark stains colored a section about ten inches long. She shuddered at the thought of what had caused the stain and dropped it on the dresser before turning to look at him. "I'm sorry."

"Don't be," he said sharply. "It was just another exciting chapter to add to my memoirs."

"Did Mark Andrew come with you?" she asked the inevitable question.

Lucio did not answer immediately, but simply looked at her incredulously as if he had truly not expected her to ask. "I don't know where he is. I thought he would be... here actually." He held out one hand to indicate her bed.

She looked about her room as if looking for Mark Andrew. "I didn't know you were home until you knocked on my door. He did come with you, didn't he?"

"Yes, he did," he answered and raised his chin slightly. "Then I suppose I'll see you in the morning."

"Yes... of course."

There was a long, terrible moment when he thought she might invite him in, but then she smiled, nodded to him once more and reached to pull the door closed. He stood in the darkened hallway another long, terrible moment, waiting for her to open the door upon possible reconsideration.

He went back to his room and fell on the bed with his bags and clothes, still wearing his boots. He was sound asleep within minutes.

((((((((((((<O>))))))))))))

Mark Andrew had not been plagued with dreams or nightmares in a while and he was grateful for that, but now he was dreaming again. He lay on Lucio's black leather sofa in the library facing the back of the couch with his sword in front of him and his knees up.

"No. Take it! Drink it!" he was shouting at Lucio, who stood on an overturned barrel. A golden-skinned woman held a cup up to the Knight of the Golden Eagle's lips, but he stubbornly refused the drink. He would not drink it. He was always so damned stubborn.

He saw Lucio being hanged again. This time, he did not turn his head or close his eyes. The black man who kicked the wooden cask from under his feet did not wear a military uniform as the one in Ethiopia had worn. This one wore only a pair of rather shabby jeans. His shirtless chest was covered with symbols drawn in white paint, but these were not elven symbols. They were something else with which he was not familiar in the least. And there were many other people present. It was night and he thought at first he was hearing the drums of the Dybbukym again, but this music was not the same. It was heavy and intensely driving, but not as precise and clear as the music of the baneful faeries. He heard many voices, human voices, speaking French. The voices were muddled. Lucio's hands were tied behind his back and he wore no hood over his face. Mark Andrew tried to look away, but could not turn away from the sight of his Brother's terrible death. As soon as he was dead, two more similarly dressed black men came to cut him down and laid him out on the ground.

He tried to turn his head again, but someone was holding his head from behind, forcing him to watch.

"Olodumare has turned into an weak, old woman," a voice said very near his ear. "We must take away Olodumare's power."

The men holding him began to laugh and then he was released. He went immediately to kneel beside Lucio. When he looked up again, hundreds of mice and rats ran across the ground from the bon fire in the

middle of the clearing. They swarmed over the dead Knight's body and began to crawl around his own knees. He looked down at the rats in horror and began to scream. He only woke up when he fell onto the floor on his back and almost cut his own throat with the Golden Sword as he fought off the remnants of the rats from his dream. The wolfhounds were very disturbed by his behavior and began to run about the library barking and growling. He chased after them when he regained his self control.

"Shhhh! Hush!" Mark Andrew tried to quiet them.

They came to sniff him suspiciously and then went back to the hearth to take up their positions again. When he turned, he was face to face with Merry, who stood in the doorway of the library looking at him in puzzlement.

"Merry!" he smiled at her apologetically and cringed at her frown before laying the sword on the couch.

"What are you doing down here, Mark Andrew?" she asked him.

"Tryin' t' sleep," he told her.

"It looks like you are playing with the dogs." She looked about.

"Not playin'," he shook his head and sat down on the couch. "Just dreamin'."

"Must have been some dream." She raised both eyebrows and came to take his hands in hers. "Why didn't you tell me you were coming home tonight?"

"I didn't want to disturb you," he said lamely.

"You didn't want to disturb Lucio," she corrected him. "It's all right. I understand."

Mark Andrew nodded. This was terrible, but it was her fault.

"I'll let you get back to your nightmares," she laughed and kissed him on the nose. "I'll see you in the morning… or rather, I'll see you later." It was almost five o'clock already. She started away from him and he pulled her back with the intention of at least kissing her, but she held up her hand in front of his face. "Don't, please..." she told him. "I… we must prepare ourselves for the ceremony. Such things are forbidden until after the invocation."

"The what?"

"We have to be clean and pure until we learn what we want to know," she told him and smiled at him mischievously.

"Dammit, Merry!" He shook his head in frustration. He had done nothing but dream of her the entire time he was gone. His dreams of holding her in his arms, in his house, in his bed had sustained him while he had been off with Lucio. He had even daydreamed of her! This was worse than worse. And he had thought he had done so well in deciding not to try to share her bedroom on Paddy's advice of course. She would not have let him in anyway!

"Shhhh!" She placed her index finger on his lips. "No swearing! No thinking impure thoughts. No profanity. No eating after sunrise or before sunset. Breakfast will be at…" She glanced at the clock on the mantle. "In forty-five minutes! I'll call you when it's ready."

"Merry…" Mark whined and looked at her in consternation. No impure thoughts? No profanity? Fasting? 'Controlling thoughts are almost impossible' Simon's words came back to haunt him. "I don't know how you expect me to live like that. How long will this last?"

"Three days," she called over her shoulder as she headed for the door. "Not long."

"Three days! Faith and begorrah!" he grumbled and caught one more frown. Why was everything three days? "Not long…" he muttered under his breath. "Sounds like you've been consorting with Sam again."

"Oh, I'm sure you will manage just fine. Remember? You're the alchemist!"

With that she was gone. Mark Andrew sat heavily on the sofa. Did it never end? And who the hell was Olodumare? And who were these people who were hanging Lucio again? Not that the Golden Eagle didn't deserve it, but… and why had he gone to Merry's room? But of course, he would go there. That was why Paddy had told him to stay downstairs. That and the fact that Merry was in some kind of purification ritual virginity. Of all things! Now she was a blooming monk! He rolled his eyes and leaned back against the cushions of the sofa, placing one hand gingerly on what would surely be his downfall if he didn't get down to his lab. He closed his eyes and heard again the singing and the drumming of the elves in his head. He longed to go back there to that wonderful place under better circumstances. Perhaps he and Merry could spend their honeymoon there when they were finally married. Perhaps Paddy could arrange it for them. Perhaps… and he was asleep again, sleeping… dreaming. Dreaming up images that would have knocked Solomon the Magnificent's socks off.

Chapter Five of Seventeen

A wise man will hear, and will increase learning

"Stephano?" A very familiar yet unfamiliar voice spoke the apprentice's name when he picked up the receiver even before he had answered.

"John… Sir John?" He asked cautiously. He hadn't heard from John Paul since John had become a Knight of the Council. Stephano Clementi had thought the prophet had forgotten about him as was practically required of those entering the Knighthood. Fraternization with the 'peons' was not advised nor encouraged.

"Yes," the priest's voice sounded distant and strained somehow. Surely they had just attended the funeral of Simon d'Ornan's apprentice, Jacques de Plessier. Stephano glanced at the clock on the wall above the desk in the library and wondered how he had managed to run him down.

"How are you?" Stephano asked. It was very strange to speak with the silent prophet on the phone. He had always known that John talked on the phone, but he'd never understood how he managed it.

"Not well," John Paul's voice was almost flat. It held none of the old excitement he used to exude in pronouncing every word that he rarely spoke. "I need you."

"How so?" Stephano's mind raced. "Where? When?"

"Scotland. As soon as possible."

"I can come at the end of the week," Stephano tried to sound calm. It would be wonderful to see his friend again. It had been years. Lucio Dambretti's apprentice had become all but a hermit, living in almost complete seclusion in Egypt. He hadn't even seen his own Master since Dambretti had lost his baby daughter on the dusty road outside of Luxor on his way here to see him. As a result of that fateful incident, he was still helping in the search for the missing child, of course, doing what he could in the volatile environment in Northern Africa.

"Good. Go with God, my friend," John Paul said and the line buzzed in his ear.

Stephano hung up the phone and turned to look about the almost deserted library. A solitary monk, dressed in simple linen robes sat at one of the long, low tables, studying an ancient scroll by the light of an oil lamp. He would have much work to do before he could leave and he would have to make some phone calls. He picked up the heavy, antique satellite phone and placed a call to the Villa in Italy. Barry of Sussex would know where he could find his Master. He would need permission to leave his studies and his work for a time.

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"Breakfast is ready," Merry said softly as she leaned over Mark Andrew and kissed his forehead. "Come on sleepy head or you will be very hungry before dark."

Mark Andrew opened his eyes and looked up at her. He felt as if someone had thrown sand in his eyes. Sleepy head? She had no idea. All of him was sleepy, numb even. She pulled him up from the sofa where he was still sitting in the same position she had left him and pushed him toward the doors.

"Go on and wash up. You can get situated after breakfast. We have to hurry. The sun will be up in an hour." Merry headed for the kitchen and Mark Andrew made his way to the bathroom under the stairs.

A few minutes later, Merry knocked on Lucio's door. After a few minutes he opened the door and stood blinking at her much as she had done only a few hours before when he had knocked on her door.

"What is it?" he asked and looked about expecting trouble.

"Breakfast," she told him. "We have to eat before the sun comes up. We're fasting."

"Fasting?!" Lucio's voice grew a bit louder. He was starving. He hadn't been able to eat anything substantial since he'd been hanged three days ago. "Why?"

"For the rites. We have to prepare," she said. "Now come on, hurry up! We have less than an hour."

She turned and hurried back down the hall toward the stairs. He leaned into the wall and watched her go. She wore a white linen dress and

her hair was pulled back in a simple ponytail under a white linen scarf. Her shoes were white and she reminded him of a nun or some such. Nuns had always intrigued him and he suddenly felt a pang of guilt for all the attempts he had made to seduce one or two along the way. He had certainly been the tool of the devil.

Now he shuddered at the thought of fasting. How long had it been since he had done such a thing? A hundred years? Two hundred? Never? He couldn't remember. He had always cheated. Cheated at chess, cheated at cards, cheated at love, cheated life, cheated death… He stumbled back to his bed and turned on the bedside lamp. His luggage was a wreck. He would have to come back later and straighten it out.

When Merry set Mark Andrew's plate in front of him a few minutes later, he frowned and looked up at her.

"And wot is this?" He looked down again. The plate held beautifully arranged peeled apple slices, toasted white bread with melted Muenster cheese slices, an omelet made with egg whites, cubed turkey breast and chopped onions, and a helping of thick, white grits, sprinkled with sugar. A small container of coconut flavored yogurt sat beside each plate. There was a small glass of juice, clear, which turned out to be white grape juice.

"That's breakfast. You can have seconds, but not thirds. That would be gluttony," she told him brightly and handed a plate to Lucio, who was busy yawning and stretching his arms over his head. She went back to bring them both tall glasses of milk.

"But it's oll white. Do we not have a bit of marmalade?" Mark continued to frown. He didn't care for milk. He had never eaten yogurt and he detested grape juice unless it was well fermented, aged and bottled in France. "Wot's this?" He poked at the grits.

"Grits with sugar… for the oatmeal. The oatmeal was too beige and I didn't want to take any chances. That's dessert," she came back again with her own plate and sat down to face them.

"Santa Maria..." Lucio said softly and perused his plate. "And when will we eat again? Perhaps a cup of coffee might be enough to get me through to lunch."

"No coffee. No caffeine. It will be after dark when we eat again and it will be all white as well," she said and put her hands on her hips. "Do not provoke your Sister to anger, Brother."

"Now, Merry…" Mark Andrew began to protest. This would not work at all. He hadn't had anything to eat since Jacques' funeral.

"Shhh!" Merry folded her hands in front of her and began the prayer for thanksgiving.

Mark Andrew looked at Lucio in wonder and Lucio shrugged and mouthed the words 'It is the will of God.' Mark nodded, but still wanted to slap him, instead, he folded his hands in his lap and sat staring at the grits as the water began to run from beneath it across the plate to soak his pitiful looking cheese toast. Three days and then he would eat someone's horse. He'd seen worse things. Eaten worse things. But even lasagna sounded better.

After breakfast and another round of prayers also led by Merry, they showered and shaved and met her in the library. She had them sit down on the sofa and dragged the footstool over in front of them.

"Now," she said and folded her hands in her lap, primly. "There will be no profanity spoken by either of you for the next three days. No impure thoughts. No angry words. No eating between dawn and dusk. You must abstain from every kind of impiety, impurity, wickedness or immodesty of body as well as soul. You will not eat superabundantly and you must not speak with vain words, buffooneries, slanders, calumnies or engage in otherwise useless discourse. You must refrain from committing anything unlawful, but you must, instead, do good deeds, speak honestly, keep strict decency in all things, never lose sight of these things in walking, talking, eating and drinking and all things you do. Is that clear?"

Mark Andrew sat with his mouth hanging open. She had covered his entire lifestyle in general, obliterating it completely and he was now quite sure that he should spend the next three days sitting perfectly still on the sofa right where he was without moving or speaking or even scratching an itch.

Lucio raised one eyebrow. He didn't think he had ever not done any of these things. Of course he had no problem abstaining from wickedness and criminal activity, though he had done some of that before as well. He rubbed his chin thoughtfully. He was not sure whether he had ever committed, caused or ate a calumny and he might have a bit of trouble with the vain words and useless discourse. It seemed that everything he said of late was either vain or useless. But if he could find Lucia by abstaining from life for a few days, it would be worth a try.

"Wot good deeds should I be doin', Sister?" Mark Andrew asked after a few minutes. "Thair's not much aboot these parts t' be doin' along those loines. I dunna think I cud…"

"Shhh!" Merry hushed him with one finger on her lips. "Don't go getting all upset, Mark Andrew. I'm not asking you to go out and save maidens in distress."

"What's a calumny?" Lucio asked her. "It sounds like a fish or something."

"It just means lies or slanders, Lucio." Merry rolled her eyes. "Do you think you can go a few days without lying or slandering someone's good name?"

Lucio frowned. He was not a liar, per se, and he didn't consider himself given to slandering anyone. Speaking his mind a bit too loudly, perhaps, but the things he said were only the truth as he saw it. He didn't think it would be a problem.

"Well, then, if that's all, then I see no problem," Lucio shrugged.

Mark Andrew nodded. He still seemed a bit confused.

"That's not all," Merry told them. "There are the rites and the ceremonies, of course, and more instruction on what your parts will be, but we'll get to that in time. All I want to know right now is if you two believe you can do this and, if not, who can I replace you with? I'm open to suggestions."

Lucio glanced at Mark and Mark looked at him. She could see that neither of them would want to be replaced.

"What about this fasting thing?" Lucio changed the subject. "If Simon is to be one of us and he is not coming until tonight, won't that mean that we'll be fasting four days because he's starting a day late?"

"Stop thinking with your stomach," Merry told him. "I talked to Simon after you two went to bed this morning and he agreed to start his fasting today, wherever he is. I'll speak to him more about it tonight when he gets here."

Mark cleared his throat and raised one hand.

"Yes?" She raised both eyebrows.

"Did ye tell 'im 'e 'ad t' eat only whoite stuff?" Mark Andrew asked her and Lucio nodded solemnly.

Merry ignored his question. "If he is agreeable to everything, then we will be a day closer already. I don't think that Simon will have a

problem with agreeing to the terms I just listed, do you?" She looked pointedly at Lucio. She needed to test the water. If Lucio was still angry with Simon, then the Italian would have to be replaced at once even though he had a personal interest in the outcome, which would greatly increase the probability of success. Louis Champlain was already there and though she would hate to ask him to join them, she would do it and she knew that he would agree to participate.

"There is something that you two can do to take your minds off your stomachs," she continued as she stood up and looked down at them when Lucio made no comment about Simon. "Your son's birthday passed a while back and we gave him a late birthday party on Sunday. I asked him what he wanted and he told me that he wanted a sword. His size, like his 'papa's'. Now he was referring to John Paul and I told him that he would need to have his own sword with his own markings on it and he seemed OK with that. Perhaps you two could make him a sword? A combination of the family crests, Sinclair and Dambretti. You have a family crest, don't you?" she directed this question to Lucio.

"Of a'course I have a family crest'a, cara mia!" Lucio lied and then crossed himself. "I'm sorry, Merry, that was a little lie. Does it a'count?" His accent slipped.

"Maybe God didn't hear it since you recanted so fast," Mark Andrew added solemnly and then smiled slightly.

"I took that name from a bottle of wine I had the misfortune of sharing the night with in Sicily. I've never seen another since. One cannot go about calling himself Lucius di Napoli in this day and age nor even Lucio of Naples. It just doesn't work. I would not take my father's name now even though I finally know…" his voice trailed off. He had forgotten to be mad, forgot to be silent and brooding as he liked to be when dealing with Merry and Mark and Simon. "He was a tyrant," he ended on a sour note. "I don't know what my mother's name was and so I have no family crest." He glanced at Mark Andrew to see if he was gloating over this embarrassing admission. "I would think we could make him one based on your name and my sword."

"The Egyptian hilt? The stylized Horus?" Mark Andrew perked up and raised one eyebrow. Not a bad design. He rather liked Lucio's dagger with its golden falcon's head.

"Of course, why not?" Lucio tried to smile and looked away from them. "Surely it would be appropriate. I think that my sword can bear witness to my own heritage. I might be considered my own ancestor, no?"

"Then I suggest that we use the wing design on the Staff of the Wisdom of Solomon and your dagger's hilt," Mark Andrew nodded thoughtfully. "Isis is sometimes depicted with wings…"

"All right then. That sounds good to me." Merry drew a deep breath and clasped her hands. At least they were working together. She needed to get back to her work. She had tools to consecrate and there was the hangman's noose to purify. Frogs and fish to disembowel... "Now, remember. No drinking, except for spring water. It's in the fridge."

"Right," Lucio agreed and stood up. "Where is Marco Niccolo anyway?" He looked about as if he just remembered the boy existed even though they had only just been talking about his birthday gift.

"I think he is out with Brother Louis, practicing his swing," Merry told them and headed upstairs.

Lucio started for the front door and Mark Andrew went toward the basement. He wanted to check on his lab and see what materials he might have on hand for sword making. He hadn't made one since he'd fashioned one for John Paul a long time ago. And his lab had been through a great deal of change since then.

He picked up a bottle of the mineral water in the kitchen to soothe his empty stomach and spoke to his daughter-in-law, who was in the process of making something on the counter. He didn't want to see it whatever it was. His stomach growled ominously. Paddy was just finishing off a huge platter of scrambled eggs, oatmeal, Canadian bacon, scones with marmalade and plenty of butter. He washed it down with what could only be a tankard of beer. The little fellow got up immediately when he passed by the table in a hurry and wiped his mouth on his napkin.

"Wait up, Andy, me boy," Paddy called and came after him at once. "Air we goin' t' be makin' swoards? I have a few ideas thot moight be of use t' ye. I've olways wanted t' try me hand at swoard-makin'. 'ow aboot a noice shamrock in th' center o' th' hilt and…"

The clurichaun followed Mark Andrew down the stairs to the cellar, laying out his idea for a design.

Lucio found Champlain and Marco out in front of the house, knocking bright orange balls down the meadow. There were many bright spots in the

grass, some nearby and some far away, barely visible.

"Ciao, Fratello," he greeted Louis in Italian and Louis handed the club over to Marco Niccolo to come and greet him in the Templar fashion, kissing him lightly on the lips.

"Brother! Welcome home." Champlain hugged him and then looked closely at his neck. No one had told the Frankish Knight about the hanging. "How goes it?"

"Oh it goes. It goes."

Lucio watched as Marco stepped into the flattened grass where Louis had been standing. The boy took a moment to study the terrain and then took two steps back. The club was made for a much taller golfer.

"I didn't expect to see you here," Louis told him bluntly. "I thought you would stay in Italy. In fact, I thought you and Brother Ramsay would be gone much longer on your quest for the child. Am I to assume that you had no success?"

"None." Lucio shook his head and stuffed his hands in his pockets as he watched the boy make a few slow, practice swings at the ball. "Are you giving him lessons?"

Champlain laughed. "Quite the contrary, Brother."

Louis turned to watch as Marco drew back the number three wood and swung it with all his might. The blade scooped up the ball perfectly and launched it down the center of the meadow where it bounced almost completely out of sight. Lucio frowned and squinted down the way following the ball to its final destination. A fabulous drive!

"But whose balls are these?" Lucio waved one hand at the sliced and battered orange balls lying within plain sight nearby.

"Those would be mine, Brother," Champlain laughed again. "Those away down there are little Marco's."

"Santa Maria!" Lucio was taken aback. He knew nothing of golf except that the hole in which one was supposed to put the ball, was usually a great distance from the little wooden stick in the ground. The only other thing he knew about the game was that it was invented by bored Scotsmen when the English King had taken away their weapons. That alone was enough to make him shun the sport.

"He says it's just a matter of applied physics," the Knight of the Golden Key told him matter-of-factly. "I never studied that subject. Perhaps I should have."

Marco went to take another ball from a box lying nearby and put it on a bright yellow tee. He came over to hand the driver up to Louis.

"Your turn, Uncle. I think you might do better with the number one wood. And put your feet a little closer together this time," he instructed the big, blonde Knight solemnly and shot one dark glance at Lucio.

"Marco," Lucio nodded to him. He had never had a conversation with the boy. The little time he had spent in Scotland after returning from the Abyss, had been filled with arguments and report making and more arguments with the Grand Master and long conversations with Mark Andrew about their trip to Africa. He had hardly passed more than a dozen words with the boy.

"Sir..." Marco said briefly and then turned to watch Louis step up to the tee and begin wiggling around. "No, Uncle. Look." He went to pick up the Knight's foot and moved it over just a bit. "There! And hold your shoulder down a bit more. Good! Now try a few practice swings."

Louis obeyed his instructions and then swung at the ball. He made a divet and hooked the ball a few hundred yards down range. They watched as the large chunk of turf flew into the air and then landed a few feet away. Louis went to pick up the piece of earth and brought it back to the sight of the tee. He patted it back in place with his foot and then poured a bit of sand from a bucket over the spot.

"Practice makes perfect," Lucio shrugged and turned his best smile on Marco when the boy looked around at him.

"Uncle Louis needs to concentrate on his swing, sir," Marco told him in all seriousness. "If you would like to stay, he would need you to be quiet."

Lucio's mouth fell open. Of all the impertinence. He felt his temper begin to rise and then thought of the promise he had made to Merry.

"Excuse me... son," Lucio said slowly before turning on his heel to go back to the house.

Marco lowered his head and watched his father retreat from under his brows. He had not wanted him to come back. It would only cause trouble for his papa. His brother. Marco did not want his brother to have any more troubles just now. He was suffering enough already because of the black sorcerer and his magick. If he were a bit older and bit stronger, he would fix that magician for messing about with his brother. His papa. And then there was the matter of his mama, Michele. She wanted to leave him all

because of Meredith Sinclair. It wasn't fair. He didn't want Michele to leave. His papa would be devastated. His papa needed Michele and it didn't matter how old she got to be. But if he had the chance, he would fix all of that, too.

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Merry made her way down the steps of the cellar and then into Mark Andrew's lab. She stopped when she saw the clurichaun standing on his head under the workbench with his feet pressed against the underside of the table. His red beard hung down in front of his face and his plaid coat hung about his arms.

"What on earth?" She leaned her head to one side to look at him and Mark Andrew shrugged at her.

"He's been under there for quite some time," Mark Andrew explained patiently. "He's throwing a tantrum," he whispered. "Pay 'im no moind."

"What?!" Merry straightened up and frowned at the Knight of Death. "Why?"

"Because I told him that I didn't want to be puttin' clovers on the hilt of Marco's sword," Mark Andrew told her and turned up the bottle of Italian spring water. He swallowed loudly and frowned as if the stuff made him ill.

Paddy flipped his feet down to the floor and stood up in front of her.

"Th' lad's totally unreasonable, Merry!" the clurichaun complained and shook off his bright green plaid coat. There were spiderwebs in his hair and dust on his hands. He brushed them together. "When me tempar gets up, I 'ave t' turn meself up-side-down t' keep from tearin' things apart." He glared at Mark who promptly ignored him. "Me apologies, lassie."

"Oh, don't worry about it." Merry smiled at the strange little fellow. "I understand completely. Why not, Mark Andrew?"

"Clovers?! On a swoard?!" Mark Andrew turned a look of disbelief on her. "Why not then a chicken's 'ead or a sow's ear? Or pr'aps a butterfly or a pansy or two?"

"Oh, thair ye go, Andy, insultin' me 'eritage again." Paddy put his hands on the floor and lifted his feet in the air.

Merry put her hand over her mouth to keep from laughing at the strange sight. It seemed he could stand on his hands as easily as his feet.

"Come on, Paddy," Merry said as she bent down to look in his comically red face. "I'll look at your design."

"Ye will?!"

To her surprise, Paddy raised one hand to lift his beard from his face and smiled up-side-down. He flipped lightly to his feet like a gymnast and climbed onto the stool next to Mark Andrew. Elbowing him to one side, he pulled a piece of paper from Mark's stack, rudely disrupting the Knight's drawing.

"Look out!" Mark Andrew said irritably and then winked at Merry. "Ye're scribblin' on me parchments."

"Look out yerself," Paddy muttered and picked up a pencil. "Now, look 'ere, Merry." Paddy began to sketch out a hilt with surprising dexterity. He drew a shamrock at the top of the hilt with the stem running down toward the guard. "Th' leaves wud be silvar o' course and th' stem, underlyin' th' 'ilt would be gold and fashioned as feathers t' represent th' Golden Eagle and th' angel's wings on yer Staff. Now in th' centers o' th' three leaves wud be a gemstone. On th' left wud be an aquamarine representing 'is papa, Lucky, and because 'is papa is left-handed. On th' roight wud be a sapphire t' represent 'is mother, you. At th' top wud be th' white sapphire o' 'is own birth. On th' flip side, wud be a' diamond fer 'is brother, John Paul, an amethyst fer Michele and at th' top a turquoise fer Andy as th' one 'oo made th' swoard fer th' boy and 'oo will be 'is father after awhoile and a bit."

Mark Andrew looked around at the clurichaun and frowned. He was drawing his own design and it was nothing like what Paddy had drawn. His had the Egyptian god, Horus, in gold on a silver hilt with golden wings on the guard and feathers down the blade.

"Let me have a look at that." Mark took the paper from him and studied the two drawings showing both sides of Paddy's proposed design. Mark scratched his left ear and then tapped his teeth with his thumbnail, which meant he was thinking.

"And down on th' underside o' th' guard, Merry," Paddy continued and eyed Mark Andrew in a sidelong glance. "Ye cud have one o' those fancy inscriptions ye loike in Latin or some such dead language sayin' somethin' special loike ad hoc infinitum tempus fugits."

Mark raised one eyebrow. It was obvious that Paddy did not speak Latin.

"I like it, Mark Andrew," Merry admitted and nodded. "What do you think? I mean, it's only a small sword and he's only a small boy. If he likes it, he can keep it and if he doesn't, when he's grown, he can design his own hilt. What do you say?"

"His father might have something to say about it," Mark Andrew shrugged. "But I think it might work."

"Thair ye go, Andy. Thot's more loike it," Paddy said, quite pleased and picked up his pipe from the worktable. He pulled out his blue bag of tobacco and began to fill the bowl of his pipe. "I'd offer ye a smoke, Andy, but ye've made th' promise to th' lassie. An, tis a shame, too! Tis a fine batch o' leaf I grew meself. And I s'pose ye won't be able t' join me in a moonlight nip later on…"

"Oh, he can have a nip after dark," Merry told the clurichaun. "He can have a nip, but he can't over-indulge. I don't want to find him laying out in the yard in the morning. Is that clear?"

Paddy smiled and nodded.

"And it has to be white wine only!" Merry said sternly and shook one finger at the clurichaun.

"Wottaver ye say, Merry," Paddy said gravely.

Merry stood up and turned to leave and then spun around.

"I almost forgot!" she said and then frowned at Paddy. "If you don't mind, Paddy, I need to speak to Mark Andrew alone for just a minute."

"O tis no problem atoll."

Paddy slid from the stool and scuttled off to the cellar. "I'll see ye after dark, Andy," he called over his shoulder.

Mark Andrew nodded to him and then looked at Merry expectantly.

"I need some of that herb you make for yourself," she told him.

"What herb?" He frowned.

"You know… the herb." She returned his frown and raised both eyebrows.

"I have many herbs here, Merry." He waved one hand about the cluttered lab. Bundles of dried leaves, flowers, vines and roots hung from nails and hooks everywhere she looked. "Ye'll have to be more specific than that."

"The herb you took to… you know… when I came to see you and you gave me your sword to sleep with?"

"I dunna think it wud work on ye, Merry."

He was flabbergasted.

"I didna know ye were so consumed with desoire fer me." He smiled at her mischievously.

"Come on, Mark Andrew. Don't tease me. I need it for something else!" She turned deep red.

"Oh? And wot wud thot be?" His face fell and he leaned toward her.

"You promised to do whatever I asked you to do," she pouted and crossed her arms over her stomach, patting one foot on the floor.

"Oh, I did, didn't I?" he nodded. "Oll roight then. I think I can foind some fer ye, but dunna be takin' it now. It cud be verra detrimental to yer health."

"Don't worry aboot thot!" She said and smiled sweetly at him. "I will nae be takin' it meself, laddie."

She turned on her heel and left him sitting at the table looking after her with a deep frown on his face.

Lucio passed her on the stairs and took hold of her arm to drag her back up the stairs to the kitchen with him.

"Merry."

He frowned at her. He didn't know how to broach the subject of Marco's impudence. "I'd have a word with you about.... our son."

"Oh?" Merry was surprised. It was a step in the right direction. Our son. That was better.

"I tried to speak to him in the yard and he was quite rude to me," Lucio told her indignantly.

"I expected that," she said sadly. "He has not been very receptive of me either. We just need to work on him a bit. He'll get used to us. I mean, he really doesn't know us, does he?"

"But if that's the case, then why do I feel like he does know me?" Lucio argued. He felt quite sure that Marco knew more than Marco should and wondered who had been telling the boy things about him? "I mean, when I look at him, I feel funny. I can't explain it."

"Maybe you just feel like I do… guilty," she said. "Just give him some time, Lucio. And stop acting like nothing is wrong. He knows things are not right. He's a very bright boy."

"I can see that. You should see him out there with Brother Louis!" Lucio smiled in spite of his worry. "He puts our Brother to shame and him just a bambino. I knew he would be special."

"I thought you'd disowned him, Lucio," she said solemnly.

"No," Lucio shook his head. "Not disowned. Just… uh…misplaced."

"Oh, I see."

She frowned. A strange statement, but better than before.

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Lucio found Mark Andrew at the workbench looking at a drawing of the proposed hilt for Marco's sword. He sat on the stool next to his Brother and looked at the sketches. The drawing was very detailed and looked more like illustrations from an ancient book than rough sketches. There were symbols drawn all about the hilt that looked vaguely like the Egyptian hieroglyphs the ancient peoples used for everyday documents. Spidery, but well-drawn.

"Not bad," he nodded. "What are these symbols?"

"Those are runes," Mark Andrew told him. "They explain the stones."

Mark showed him what the stones were to represent, but failed to mention the part about himself being Marco's father as well as Lucio; he listed himself as merely the swordsmith.

"I like it," Lucio announced. "It's… it's... He should be quite proud of it."

"Pride is a sin, Brother," Mark reminded him. "We are under obligation to Merry not to behave in unseemly manners. If we lead the boy to sin, then we are sinners as well and doubly so."

"You have to be joking, Brother," Lucio laughed. "Pride is not a sin. It is a necessity. If one has no pride then one has no honor. If one has no honor then one is without worth. If one has no worth then one would be… worthless."

"That is called useless discourse," Mark Andrew objected. "We promised Merry not to indulge in useless discourse."

"Santa Maria!" Lucio looked at him in consternation.

"That is swearing," Mark Andrew shook his head.

"You are insane!" Lucio's face darkened.

"That is calumny," Mark Andrew responded.

"I have never slandered you, Brother!" Lucio objected.

"That is dishonesty," Mark countered and sighed like one with great wisdom addressing a small child.

"I have always been honorable and decent in regard to my feelings about you," Lucio told him indignantly.

"That is a lie," Mark Andrew shook his head.

"I am your best and truest friend, Brother, though you may not realize it. No one would have ever done what I have done for you." Lucio's face grew red with anger.

"Or to me. That is vanity and self-glorification." Mark Andrew refused to be stopped.

Lucio was speechless.

"Well, what do you have to say for yourself now?" Mark Andrew looked at him expectantly and then smiled.

"You're just trying to provoke me," Lucio grumbled, but tried very hard to remain calm. "You would have me fail in my promise to Merry just to see me lose face with her again."

"I don't think you need my help to do that, Brother," Mark Andrew said evenly as his smile faded. "I am just trying to make a point. It has been a very, very long time since you have attempted to lead a pious life, if you ever did. You have never been modest and you have never excelled at purity of thought. You are too arrogant to be humble in word or deed. I only want to point out to you that you really should give some thought to what you have promised to do. I, of all men, don't mean to sound self-righteous. You know me better than that. You know me better than anyone else and for that, I am but… regretful. That is why I haven't killed you, even though I have threatened to do it many times. You are so full of yourself, you believe that you are right in your thoughts and your actions, but you have done nothing but torment me ever since I met you in the well in Jerusalem. I truly believe that you were sent by the devil just to punish me for my sins and that is why I put up with you. Because I deserve you."

"And just what do you call all of this, Brother? Surely such unkind words must fall into one of the forbidden categories? Is this sort of speech to your Brother not some kind of sin?" Lucio blinked at him in disbelief.

"We promised Merry to speak honestly," Mark told him. He really had no idea why he was being so harsh on Lucio. He had simply opened his mouth and the words had poured out. He did not feel better, just empty as if this had been some poison waiting to come out for a long, long time.

"Then I should speak honestly with you, Brother," Lucio continued after a moment. "I would have you know that I had wished to kill you many times as well. I have always envied you and your noble Scottish bloodlines. I have always envied you your cool exterior and your strength of character, your simplicity of purpose and your dogged determination. I have always envied you, Brother, and envy is something I believe you are incapable of understanding or relating to."

"I believe that the only reason I ever took any of your women from you was a vain attempt just to get your attention. Just to get you to feel the same way I do. Just once! Just once! I would like to know that, under all that built-in armor and sanctimonious superiority, you would envy me something… anything. I used to think you were a hero in spite of your little indiscretions, which I always attributed to your bad temper and your inability to truly love a woman."

"Never once did I tell anyone anything about you that would discredit you. You never needed to make that statement to me in the first place, though I remember it like it was just yesterday! One misplaced word and the world will no longer know you. Basta! From the start you mistrusted me and I would have died for you. An illiterate ragamuffin from the slums of Naples."

"And if pride is a sin, Brother, then I have sinned greatly in that I was always proud to be your friend and your Brother and your companion and your little worshipper, your devotee. But you never noticed that, did you? And you were always so brave. So damned brave and I was always a coward. If you didn't shove me out in front of you, I wouldn't go into a dark room. You made me what I am, Mark Andrew. I am the son you raised all by yourself. How can you hold me at fault? I am your own creation."

"You envy me?" Mark Andrew asked in disbelief. He was astounded at this confession.

"Yes. That is what I have been trying to say!" Lucio snapped and stood up. "Do you think that I would ever have fallen in love with your woman and even married her, if I did not want to fill your boots? Even to

the point of taking your wife, if I did not love you and admire you and want to be you? Il mio dio, mio caro! Don't you think I should have gone off in search of a virgin to wed? Why would I want someone's used goods? Why would I have given her a second glance after I learned she was yours except that she belonged to you? Now I see where I made my mistake. I never separated myself from you. I've spent most of my long life confusing myself with you."

"I thought you were just arrogant and self-centered," Mark Andrew said quietly. "I never knew you actually liked me."

"Liked you?! I worshipped you! You were everything I wanted to be right down to cutting off people's heads with your damnable golden sword. You just don't get it, do you?" Lucio turned very pale as the anger left him. He looked completely and utterly devastated. "And even now, I can look at your soul and see that you are completely without malice and without spite. That you are speaking from your heart and that makes this even more unbearable. If I knew that you were just saying these things because you are angry with me, I could live with it, but this… It will never do!" The Italian turned on his heel and left him alone in the lab unable to go on.

Mark Andrew stared after him in shock.

"Santa Maria!" Mark said softly and then turned to pick up the drawing.

Surely he had enough material lying around to begin working on the sword. He went to the big oven and began to load it full of coal. His stomach growled and he frowned. He hadn't been this hungry in a long time. He would have even welcomed a bottle of strawberry-kiwi juice. Worse yet, he had something even more pressing on his mind than Lucio's confession. He had to go to the chapel and find Sir Philip's coffin.

((((((((((((<O>))))))))))))

Lucio was extremely tired. He'd had very little sleep and no rest since being hanged in Africa. His neck still hurt and his voice was raspy, especially after his encounter with John Paul at the Villa and then with Mark Andrew in the laboratory. Mark Andrew's words had hurt him deeply and he had not known that such a thing was still possible. He was hungry,

starving and he could not eat. He'd promised Merry. He loved her still to distraction and knew that he would never ever get over her… not completely… not in a thousand years… not in a thousand women.H He lay on his bed upstairs trying to sleep.

When he closed his eyes he found himself in the top of a huge tree. Beneath him were hundreds of people shouting up to him, calling his name, begging him to come down. He stood on one of the branches and looked down at them in puzzlement. They were calling him by a strange name he had never heard before in his life and they were pleading with him not to hang himself. Hang himself? Why would he hang himself?

These people must be the Ethiopians again and they were trying to trick him into coming down so they could hang him again. They were all black except one white woman. Merry.

"Obakoso!" she shouted the strange name up at him. "Come down! Come home to the palace and I will fix the wild duck you asked for!"

"No! I don't want wild duck!" he shouted down to her. "Go away! Leave me alone! I just want to sleep."

"No! Come down. Your people need you, Obakoso!" Merry shouted and turned away from him and he heard music drifting up to his ears. It sounded like the elven music only it was not as fine, not as beautiful, though it made him want to dance.

All the people under the tree began to dance about its trunk, pleading and shouting up to him to come down, promising him all sorts of things to eat. He was starving. He climbed down the tree and dropped onto the ground holding his broadsword in front of him. One of the men came forward and handed him a bowl full of meat of some sort. Roasted pork! It smelled divine, but now the music was in his head and he wanted to dance. He looked for Merry in the crowd, but could not find her. A man came by and took the food away from him.

"Come with me, Obakoso."

The man pulled him into the midst of the dancers and he began to dance with the man. After a few moments, a tall woman danced between them. Her skin and eyes were golden and her hair was coppery in color. She wore a long, tightly fitted white dress that showed everything it was supposed to hide. She began to twirl around in front of him, dancing and swaying to the music. Each time she turned to face him, she beckoned to him to come to her. He kept his sword in one hand and took her hand in the

other. Soon she was dancing very close to him and whispering extremely provocative words in his ears. She led him to the edge of the dancing men and women and then stopped to point at a very smooth patch of ground that was tinged red with some sort of mold or fungus.

"If you don't come home with me, my husband, then that is where you belong," she said.

"I'm not your husband!" he objected automatically and turned to look at her and she shoved him onto the smooth patch of ground.

It was not solid ground. It was like quicksand. When the ooze began to envelope his feet and legs, he looked down in horror and then up at the woman who merely smiled at him as he sank.

He raised his sword to the sky and a great lightning bolt came down to strike the earth beside her. She screamed, throwing her long arms over her head, shrinking back.

Her scream awoke him and he found himself back on his bed in Mark Andrew's house drenched in a cold sweat. This was too much! Quicksand! Yes, he was sinking in quicksand and he had to pull himself out because no one else was going to help him. He had alienated himself from all his Brothers and even John Paul was attacking him now. The man that would never hurt anyone had attacked him in front of the entire Council. He got up from the bed and knelt beside it on the floor and began to pray. He had promised Merry and for once, he intended to fulfill his promise, even if it killed him. And after his prayers, he would go back down to the lab and help Mark Andrew make a sword for Marco.

Chapter Six of Seventeen
When your fear cometh as desolation

John Paul Sinclair-Ramsay was on his way back to Scotland. He had spoken with Father DeMontrand by phone and discussed his terrible nightmares and all the things that had been bothering him of late and Father DeMontrand had listened to him with grave attention and sympathy. Azariah had reminded him of the importance of dreams and had pointed out that dreams were not to be taken personally in the manner in which he was taking these images and visions. These dreams were not of his mind. These things were merely images, not sins, not things he had actually done. Azariah had also pointed out that the dreams were most likely the experiences or even the dreams of his father. But Azariah had been unable to glean any meaning from them. The priest possessed the power by divine inspiration to interpret dreams and visions, but he could not interpret John Paul's dreams. It was as if they had no purpose other than to upset his friend and companion.

In the end, Azariah had concluded that the dreams were a product of sorcery and had been put upon John Paul merely to torment him. John Paul had accepted this to be true. He felt much better after having talked to his friend, but the dreams kept coming, growing in intensity and realism until he had a hard time waking up and they certainly were living up to their purpose. He felt terrible and he didn't want to sleep at all. But he had not mentioned Michele and the fact that she was planning on leaving him. He could not bring himself to admit it. She could not leave. It was just not possible.

Whatever he had done to Michele had happened while he had been asleep. She would not discuss it with him at all and he did not want to look into her thoughts. He only did that when it was absolutely necessary to gain knowledge or to give knowledge. He had never used it for personal reasons other than the one time and right now, the problem between himself and Michele was very personal. Further, Michele had never had trouble talking to him before. Why was she not talking to him now? Another thing that bothered him was the fact that he truly, deep down did not want to know

what had happened because he feared he already knew and if that was the case, then he could not blame her for being reluctant to talk to him about it. Perhaps he could persuade her to talk to someone else. Perhaps he could persuade her talk to his mother, but that would mean that he would have to talk to Meredith first as a Sister of the Order and explain what he thought might have happened and he didn't know if he could do that. She was, after all, his mother, but she was also his Sister and he needed someone who might understand him on the level of an equal within the Order as well. He laid his seat back and stared directly into the eyes of one of the flight attendants.

"Would you like something to drink, Father?" the woman asked.

He shook his head.

"We have some very good wine," she said and raised both eyebrows. "Coconut wine. Pineapple wine."

Coconut wine? Pineapple wine? Unusual vines for wine.

He shook his head again and she sat down next to him. Unusual behavior for a flight attendant.

"You need someone to talk to, Father," she said and he turned his head to look more closely at her.

"No," he told her again.

"Yes, you do." She smiled. Her skin was golden brown. Her eyes reminded him of Armand de Bleu's golden eyes and her hair was coppery-gold in color and piled on her head in a complicated array of intertwining braids. Obviously not an airline employee. She took a drink from a small plastic tumbler and then leaned over suddenly to kiss him, allowing the juice from the glass to flow into his mouth. The action was so quick and shocking, he did not move for a moment and then the taste of the extremely powerful and sickly sweet drink made him choke. He sat up and sprayed the stuff in his lap.

"What?!" He looked at her in disbelief and she held out the cup to him.

"Aguardiente. Drink it."

He took the glass from her and drank it down unable to resist her words.

"Your sister is waiting for you, Father," she said. "She is waiting for you to come to her. Do you have Holy Water, Father?"

John Paul reached in his pocket and pulled out a small vial and handed it to her. He could not look away from her golden eyes. She took the Holy Water and poured a bit in the glass and then refilled the cup from a ceramic pitcher she produced seemingly from nowhere. He watched in fascination as she stirred the mixture with one long, elegantly manicured finger. She stood up and then poured three small dollops of the liquid around him. One on either side and one in front of his feet. She took some more of the liquid in her mouth and then sprayed a very fine mist in his face. It was cool and refreshing like rain on a hot summer day.

"Who are you?" he heard his own voice as if from another vantage point.

"Excuse me?" The dark haired, blue-eyed flight attendant blinked at him in surprise.

"What?" He frowned at the brunette woman who held a glass out to him.

"I believe you were dreaming, Father," she said sweetly and smiled at him condescendingly. "Here's your orange juice."

John Paul took the small plastic tumbler from her and looked into the yellow liquid suspiciously.

"Would you like anything else?" she asked.

"No!" he said a bit too forcefully and then looked around at the passengers sitting nearby. They were all absorbed in their in own worlds.

When she had gone, he checked his clothing over and found nothing amiss, nor did he find any spots on the floor, nor on the seats or the people sitting next to him. He slipped his hand into the pocket of his coat. The vial of Holy Water that he had taken from the cistern at the chapel in Italy was gone. He turned up the orange juice and drank it down. It was not real orange juice, but it took the sweet taste of the aguardiente out of his mouth. It did not take the memory of the dream from his mind. He rubbed one hand over his face and felt the sticky residue of the spray from the golden woman's lips on his skin. He had to get home. He had to find his mother. He had to find Michele. And he had to find his sister, Lucia Simone.

((((((((((((<O>))))))))))))

Simon walked down the length of the Cappella Sistina in Rome, casually observing the paintings and relics as any other tourist might do. When he got to the end of the area allowed to visitors, he leaned slightly over the ropes to peer at the small painting set in the wall near the altar, depicting Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden with the Tree of Life and the Serpent. He could barely make out the letters 'Nomis' below the eye of the serpent.

He had a very bad feeling about this. He had not been able to ask Azariah or John Paul if they had succeeded in the original mission to bring the Ark to this place and he had not been able to meet them as he had promised due to his slight mishap and subsequent sojourn in the underworld. Now he was almost afraid to ask them and they had volunteered no information to him. He had simply assumed that they carried out the plan without him. What else could they have done? But now, as he stood before the wall behind which should have been the most Holy Relic in the entire world, he felt nothing. He would have to ask John Paul about it. He had no choice.

If they had not brought the Ark here, then he needed to know where it was. It was very frightening to think that perhaps only three men in the world knew its whereabouts and one of them had just died. Jacques de Plessier had made no mention of it to him during his brief and painful stay in the hospital and Simon had not thought to ask his ailing apprentice about it. He could kick himself now all he wanted, but Jacques was gone and he had missed his chance. It would have been much easier to ask Jacques than John Paul and it would be almost impossible to ask Azariah without traveling to Tel-Aviv to see him in person. It would never do to discuss such a topic over the phone. John Paul would just have to answer him.

((((((((((((<O>))))))))))))

The trip to the chapel had been a terrible ordeal. Sir Philip was dead. Sir Philip's presence was gone. Only his body remained in the coffin in the crypt. The chapel was empty of its greatest treasure. The Ark was gone and Mark could only think that it was for the best in his opinion. Only John

Paul's presence was there in all the trappings he had brought and installed from all over Europe and other places.

Mark was tired and his mind was full of dark thoughts. He had to shake them off before he spoiled Merry's plans. He went to the library and sent off an elaborate email to the Grand Master, telling him that he had fulfilled his duties in regard to the late Seneschal and that Sir Philip was indeed quite dead. This news would confirm everyone's suspicions that John Paul might possess many divinely inspired powers belonging to the members of the Council of Twelve without having officially received them from him or the Grand Master. John Paul had received his gifts directly from God Himself, it seemed and that was a disconcerting thought. At least he was a bit relieved to know that someone else now possessed the ability to release them should the need arise and though he hated for his son to bear such a burden, it still gave him a sense of relief. He would speak to John Paul about it and see if the prophet needed to talk to him about it. It was a great burden indeed, and John Paul had possessed such a gentle, innocent soul as a boy. So full of light and life. Would this new occupation dampen his soul and turn him dark like his father? Stained by the tragedies of a thousand years of grief?

((((((((((((<O>))))))))))))

John Paul burst through the front door of his father's home and stopped in the entry hall where he whirled about as if being chased by devils.

"Michele! Mama!" he shouted up the stairs and then down the hallway toward the kitchen.

He shouted again and then leaned on the banister railing, holding on with one hand and pressing the other to his stomach. His heart was racing. Where were they? Where were they?

Michele came down the stairs first. She stopped halfway down to frown at the top of his head and then ran down the rest of the steps to catch him when he swayed and then sat heavily on the bottom step. He grabbed her hands in his and looked up into her face and she thought something horrible had happened. He was pale and the look in his normally clear blue

eyes was frightening. Merry came from the kitchen hallway and stopped to stare at him.

"Mama!" He pushed himself up and let go of Michele to take his mother's arm. Michele backed away and he caught her with his other hand. "Michele."

He was shaking and they were beside themselves with alarm.

"John Paul! What is the matter?" Merry looked closely at him.

"John?" Michele asked hesitantly.

"Mama," he repeated and sat down again, almost pulling both women down on top of him.

"Meredith, what's wrong with him?" Michele looked at her mother-in-law for help.

Merry pulled her hand away from him just as his eyes rolled back in his head and he slumped back on the stairs. Michele caught him awkwardly as he slipped down the steps.

"Wait! I'll get Mark Andrew!"

Merry ran down the hall towards the cellar. Within moments, she was back with his father and Lucio as well. The two men picked him up between them and managed to get him up the stairs into the bedroom he shared with Michele. They put him on the bed and then stood back as Merry and Michele fussed around him, checking his pulse and his forehead for fever, but they found nothing out of the ordinary. He would not respond to their attempts to wake him, but lay as he had so many times after making some prophecy or another.

"Wot happened?" Mark Andrew asked the women. "When did 'e retarn?"

"He just got back apparently. He was in the hall calling me and I think, Michele, too," Merry told him.

"Yes, I heard him. I was upstairs with Marco when I heard him shouting…" She glanced at the door and saw the boy standing in the open doorway, looking at them with a peculiar expression on his face.

"I don't know what happened," Merry told them as one boot came free. Michele took off the other boot.

"He just fainted on the steps," Michele said and then turned to the boy. "It's all right Marco. He'll be fine."

Marco said nothing.

Lucio turned to look at the boy.

"Come on, Marco." He went to place one hand on the boy's shoulder and Marco shrank away from him.

"Come on, son!" Lucio told him a bit sterner and reached for him again. Marco jerked away from him and backed into the hall.

"I'm not your son!" he shouted at the Italian.

"Marco!" Michele called to him from the bedroom. "Mind your manners!"

"I can handle this, Michele," Lucio said quietly and pulled the door closed. The boy looked up at him defiantly.

Lucio stepped forward, caught him by the hand and dragged him kicking and screaming down the hall to his own room and tossed him on the bed before going back to close the door. Marco leaped from the bed and tried to dash past him. Lucio caught him easily and threw him back on the bed where he bounced twice and was up again. He dashed for the door again screaming for his 'papa'. Lucio caught him again and repeated the same process.

"I'm your papa, boy," Lucio told him quietly. He could see fear in his son's soul, but not hatred. The rest of the colors and patterns were a morass of conflicting emotions. Lucio shuddered and closed his eyes briefly. He'd seen these things before… in prisons, in monasteries… in insane asylums. His son displayed traits of a madman in the making. It just could not be true! What had happened to him?

Marco came off the bed a bit more slowly and tried to edge past the Knight, his eyes darting between the window and the bed as if he was considering throwing himself from the window. Lucio allowed him to make his move for the door, caught him up lazily and swung him back on the bed with very little effort. He was lighter than he looked.

Marco sat in the middle of the bed, shouting for his papa and his mama for a few moments and then frowned. He got up again on the opposite side of the bed and then went down on the floor where he scooted under the bed. Lucio moved over by the door and leaned against it with his arms folded over his chest. The boy crawled under the bed and peeked out at him from under the overhanging quilt.

"Go away!" he shouted at Lucio. "Behold the pale horse. Death sat upon him and Hell followed after. You're not my father! You're a demon! Death is your master. Go back to Hell where you belong and leave us alone!"

Lucio patted one foot and shook his head in disbelief. Until now, he'd thought it pretty damned cool to have been elected to be one of the horsemen of the Apocalypse. It didn't sound quite the same coming from the lips and mind of a six year old boy. The boy disappeared back under the bed and came up again on the other side to glare at him across the mattress.

"Go away! I hate you! You're not my papa! I want my papa!" the boy screamed at him again.

"I am your papa. John Paul is your brother. Merry is your mother and Michele is your sister-in-law," Lucio told him quietly. "If I am a demon, then you are half-demon. Now you can accept that or you can stay right there for eternity. I have nothing better to do. Basta!" Lucio snapped his fingers in the air.

"I won't stay here!" Marco said, a bit less hysterically and then climbed onto the bed. "You can't make me stay here. My papa won't allow you to make me stay here."

"Your brother will not stop me," Lucio smiled at him. "He knows who I am."

"I know who you are. Lucius of Venetia! Your mother was a witch!" Marco shouted at him.

Lucio blinked and then raised his chin slightly. Who had been telling him these things? Michele? No. Michele knew nothing of these things. John Paul? It hardly seemed reasonable to believe John would do such a thing. He'd heard John speaking with Marco about the situation. Trying again and again to explain, in as few words as possible, Marco's heritage to him. Who then?

"You don't know anything about my mother," Lucio said as anger raised its ugly head. He was not angry with the child. It was not Marco's fault. He was angry that someone would poison his son against him. Louis Champlain? Hardly. "She was your grandmother. I could say that your grandmother was a witch. How would you like that?"

"Your wife is a witch!" Marco shouted at him.

"And then your mother is a witch, no? What does that make you, Marco?" Lucio asked and eyed him steadily. "A toad? A magick concoction? Are you so perfect? Who told you these things?"

"I am a Poor Knight of Solomon's Temple!" Marco shouted at him.

"Santa Maria! You are nothing, but a brat! A disrespectful brat who is in need of a good spanking. You are not fit to wipe horse dung from a

Knight's boots," Lucio said darkly. "You are insulting your own blood line. You don't even know what you're talking about. Your grandfather was a Venetian nobleman, a king, and your grandmother was a beautiful young woman. Your father is of noble blood and your mother is descended from Scottish aristocrats. That makes you special, but your mouth makes you a fool. You are not a Knight of the Temple. A Knight of the Temple would never speak so to his Brothers. He would have more respect. More honor."

"You have no honor," Marco pouted. "You stole another man's wife."

"She was not his wife," Lucio whispered and returned to his smiling state. "She married me and you were the result. You are nothing more than a single night's pleasure and you should remember that. If you would be my son, you would remember your manners and your place. If you want to be a Knight of the Temple, you would first have to be a man and then perhaps we would see. If you refuse to admit your birth, then how can you face the future? How can you deny yourself? Why would you want to?"

Marco Niccolo blinked at him and then looked down at the quilt.

"You're not going to beat me?" He looked up after a moment.

"Do you think I need to?" Lucio asked him and took a step forward.

"No!" Marco pushed himself back a bit.

"Then what should I do?" Lucio asked as if truly puzzled.

"I think you should forgive me," Marco said solemnly. "I mean… that is what one Brother should do for another Brother. If I asked you to forgive me, then you would be obligated to forgive me, right?"

"Where did you learn such big words? But yes. Si`," Lucio mused and then suppressed a smile. "Are you asking for forgiveness?"

"Shrive me, Brother, for I have sinned," Marco said quietly and bowed his head.

"You forgot something." Lucio stepped closer to the bed. "You forgot to strike my shoulder."

"Oh, yeah." Marco looked up at him in surprise and then stood on the bed and swung at his father's shoulder, barely able to deliver a glancing blow.

Lucio drew back his fist and knocked him out of the bed onto the floor. The impact was sound enough to shock him, but not enough to bruise him.

Marco looked up at him in disbelief and started to get up. Tears sprang to his eyes.

"No, no." Lucio pushed him back down on his knees. "A Knight of the Temple repents on his knees before God, Brother."

Marco frowned angrily, but stayed on his knees. He bowed his head and clasped his hands in front of him.

"Forgive me, Father, for I have sinned. It has been twelve days since my last confession."

"Now that's more like it." Lucio smiled down at the boy's head. Twelve days? It was hard to believe that one so young would have sins to confess, and making them on a regular basis. This was surely the work of John Paul. "What is the nature of your sins, my son?"

((((((((((((<O>))))))))))))

John Paul awoke and asked for a glass of water and some aspirin. Michele stayed with him while Merry went to get them. Mark followed her. He didn't want to be left with Michele; she obviously didn't like him.

"What do you suppose happened to him?" Mark Andrew asked her as they started down the stairs.

"I don't know. He scared the daylights out of me. And Michele said some very disturbing things to me the other day."

"Disturbing? How so?"

"She said that I don't know John Paul at all." Merry glanced back at him. "She said she was leaving. That she would not stay here and grow old. I hadn't given much thought to how she must feel."

"She can't leave," Mark Andrew told her simply in a tone that caused her to draw up short and turn to look at him.

"What do you mean, she can't leave?" Merry narrowed her eyes at him.

"She can't leave. Simple." He raised both eyebrows. "She can't leave for the same reasons Anthony Scalia could not leave."

Merry almost laughed and then a sick feeling washed over her. She went on her way for the water and the aspirin, trying to get away from him. He followed her. His mention of the traitorous apprentice, Anthony, who

had been the Grand Master's apprentice made her stomach turn. Anthony had been the reason Mark Andrew had come to America. It had been his search for the apprentice that had brought them together. Mark Andrew had come to take Anthony back to the Order or to kill him! He had been on a mission as the Assassin for the Order. Merry rarely thought of his occupation. His primary occupation. She preferred to think of him as the Alchemist.

He waited for her to get the water and the pills and then followed her back to the stairs oblivious to her attempts to shake him.

"Merry…" he said as she started up the stairs. She turned to look back down at him.

"Michele cannot leave. Don't encourage her," he said and then turned to head back down the hall toward the cellar where he had been working on Marco's sword. It sounded more like a plea than a warning.

Merry shuddered and started up the stairs with the water. Marco Niccolo came bounding down the hall from Lucio's room, smiling. He almost ran into her in his haste to get downstairs.

"Mama!" he said, when she caught him to keep him from falling. "I'm sorry. I didn't see you. Is Brother John all right now?"

"Yes, he is." Merry frowned and then looked up to see Lucio leaning against the wall near the stairs. He was not smiling. She missed his smile.

Marco went around her and then hopped down the stairs to the entry hall where he stopped to call out the two wolfhounds from the library. He opened the front door and the three of them rushed outside into the bright sunshine, the dogs barking and Marco shouting for his Uncle Louis. Merry climbed the stairs more slowly.

"What did you do to him?" she asked when she came even with the Italian.

"Nothing," Lucio shrugged and then smiled his devastating smile, crinkling the long scar on his cheek.

"You had to do something," she forced her attention away from his face. She had wanted him to smile, but now she wished he hadn't. "He's never called me 'mama' before."

"I did nothing he didn't ask me to do," Lucio told her.

"And what did he ask you to do?"

"He wanted to make his confession," Lucio told her and then his smile lost some of its glory. He looked down at his feet. "He had quite a list of

sins for one so young."

"Sins! Marco?" Merry's mouth fell open.

"Yes, Sister, Marco! Boys his age are very precocious in case you didn't know and you should know… you raised one to the same age."

"John Paul was not exactly precocious,"Merry objected automatically. "Marco seems wise beyond his years."

"Oh, yes, he is very wise, Sister," Lucio nodded gravely. "Too wise. Frighteningly wise. And his ego along with his intellect are even bigger than his vocabulary. You should have no more trouble from him. Just be firm and insist on being called by your proper title. Mother. Mom. Mama, but don't answer to Sister."

"I see," Merry nodded and then looked down at the glass of water in her hand. "Oh! I almost forgot. John Paul wants to talk to me. It seems he has a terrible headache."

She hurried away down the hall and Lucio went back down the stairs toward the cellar. It wouldn't surprise him if Marco Niccolo used his new sword to cut his head off one night. It wouldn't surprise him at all.

((((((((((((<O>))))))))))))

Merry sat down in a chair by John Paul's bed and waited for him to drink his water and take his aspirin while Michele gathered up her embroidery and left them alone.

"Mama," John Paul said and squinted at her as soon as Michele had closed the door. The pain in his head was evident in his eyes. She wondered about the source of the headaches.

"What is it, sweetie? You scared the life out of me."

"Mama," John Paul said the same word again and then looked away from her. How could he talk to her? How could he explain about Michele? Sweetie.

"John. Brother?" Merry tried to change the focus. If he couldn't speak to her as his mother, perhaps they could speak as Knights of the Council. Perhaps it was business that he wanted to talk about. She leaned forward to touch his arm.

"Sister." John Paul turned to look at her and his face lit up in spite of the pain in his head. That was it! Stop thinking of her as 'mama'! Think of her as Sister Meredith, Poor Knight of Solomon's Temple. "I have sinned."

"Do you want to confess?" She sat back, astounded by his words. How could she listen to her son's confession?

"Yes, but not to you," he said slowly. "It wouldn't be proper. I tried to confess to Brother Simon and he said that I could not confess sins that were not my own. Father DeMontrand told me the same thing and for this at least I am grateful."

"That sounds like the truth. Simon should know," Merry told him, greatly relieved to hear that he would not be confessing to her. "Brother Simon is an expert in the field, you know."

John Paul smiled at this. He was also an expert in the field, but his mother had never really accepted the fact that her son had become a minister.

"He is in love with you, Sister," he said and Merry almost fainted. "But it is nothing. I did something very bad in Italy."

"What?" she asked in a small voice.

"I attacked Brother Dambretti and then I tried to commit suicide," he told her and she saw stars swimming in front of her face. "But I don't remember it. That is what bothers me, Sister. I don't remember it. I fell on Sir Philip and killed him and I don't remember it. I did something to Michele that changed her feelings for me and I don't remember it. But I have dreams that don't belong to me, that belong to my father and yet I remember them completely. In fact, I remember them so well that I tried to confess them to Brother Simon!"

Merry was flabbergasted. John Paul had never spoken so much to her before. Never. It was an odd sensation to hear him carrying on a conversation like a normal person, even though the conversation was certainly not normal. It almost made her angry to think that he could have been talking to her all these years and yet, he had not. But the meaning of his words overrode her personal feelings. He was in trouble and needed her help.

"You have never remembered your prophecies, John Paul, and you have always fainted and slept afterwards. You can't fault yourself for that. It is the will of God as Lucio would say. You can't blame yourself for Sir

Philip's death. That, too, was the will of God. You were meant to replace him. Surely you can see that. His death was an accident. In fact, I understand that he intentionally put himself in harm's way to save you and Brother Konrad. Philip was tired. He even mentioned it to me and we hardly spoke to each other more than a dozen times. God took Philip to Himself. He lived a long and useful life as a man and God has rewarded him with eternal life and peace. You were merely the instrument for his passing and at the same time you were his relief. But I can't help you with Michele unless you can tell me what happened."

"I can't remember." John Paul shook his head. "I wanted you to talk to her for me. She won't talk to me about it." He reached to take her hand and looked at her from a very troubled face. "I fear that I may have perpetrated a terrible crime upon her."

"No. I think not. I don't believe it."

"It's true. I feel it." John Paul was close to tears now. "She wants to leave me. She wants to leave Scotland."

"I know," Merry murmured and swallowed hard, trying not to cry. "She told me."

"You know she can't leave, Sister." John Paul sat up a bit straighter. He sounded exactly like his father. Exactly. "You know that."

"Did you tell her this?" Merry asked quietly. With sudden clarity she understood Mark Andrew's words. They had already made one mistake with Argonne's apprentice and it had had terrible repercussions. Mark Andrew had had to kill him anyway, even though they had let him leave the Order, but Michele was not a Templar. She was a Templar's wife. Surely…

"I did tell her," John Paul said quietly.

"And how did you tell her?" Merry had to ask.

"When we were married." John Paul looked away from her. "Do you remember the vows? There was a clause… a phrase…"

"Yes?" Merry's voice was a bare whisper now.

"Until death do us part," John Paul said as a single tear rolled down his cheek. Merry hadn't seen him cry since he'd scraped his knee in the garden at the tender age of six.

((((((((((((<O>))))))))))))

Al Sajek al Hafiz stepped cautiously from the darkened mouth of the cave onto a ledge in a great cavern. The black pit yawned before him and the mottled black and silver ceiling glimmered overhead from the light of the full moon passing through it as if it were glass. The magician looked up at the roof of the cavern and frowned. The mottling was smoke residue on the underside of the mercury. He could smell it. He could smell the acrid odor of the burned and shriveled husks of the Dybbukym still lying scattered about the ledge. He could smell the richer, deeper odor of the burned flesh of his beloved serpent. This is where they burned her. He sniffed the air rising out of the pit. Gas? They had ignited the gas! Very clever. Very foolish. But very clever.

The rumblings from below intensified a bit and then subsided. He had once tried to warn men that they would foolishly awaken the Old Ones with their meddling. The Ancient Ones who slept in the Abyss were best left sleeping and yet his dire predictions had come to pass. The Templars had awakened the Queen herself and she had come out of the pit! Ramsay should have known better. It was a wonder that there was anything left standing here or above. She had come after the serpent and had taken back the power he had stolen to create her. His serpent had been reabsorbed into the ancient Queen. Certainly, she would wreak havoc on him if he was not careful. He had taken from her without asking. A chill course up his spine and spread down his arms. Backing away from the pit silently, he then turned to hurry down the dark tunnel, holding a small crystal orb above his head for light. He had to get away before she smelled him.

((((((((((((<O>))))))))))))

Lucio looked up from the workbench at the skylight in the roof of Mark Andrew's basement laboratory. He had been carefully carving out a wax prototype for the silver clover that would decorate Marco's sword in order to make the mold. The sun was fading at last and not a bit too soon. He was absolutely famished.

"Do we have a stopping point, Brother?" he called to Mark Andrew who was on his knees peering into the grate of the big oven.

"Stopping point?" Mark looked around at the Italian.

"Yes, it's almost sundown and if I don't eat soon, I'll dry up and blow away." Lucio stretched his arms over his head.

"Oh." Mark Andrew looked up at the skylight. It must have been almost eight o'clock. The sky was a deep violet blue overhead and the full moon was rising, just becoming visible in the window. "Yes. We can let this go until tomorrow. I'll have to start on the blade. That's the most time-consuming part. Hammering it out. It's good therapy for anger management, but it gives me a headache… sometimes."

Lucio narrowed his eyes at the Scot. Anger management? This was something coming from Meredith.

"Well, it's only for a small boy," Lucio reminded him. "You're not making a sword for a Samurai chieftain, mio caro."

"Aye, but I wouldn't want it to break while he's playing with it," Mark Andrew shrugged. It was a matter of principle. You make a sword, you make a sword. Simple. Big. Little. No difference.

"Playing is the key word," Lucio nodded and then stretched his back, before reaching up to touch the bruise now fading on the side of his head. "We'll have to teach him to use it once he has it or he'll cut off his own feet."

"That's true enough," Mark had to agree. It sounded good to hear him say 'we' even though he still wanted Lucio gone from his life. But since the terrible confession the Knight had made to him earlier, he could at least look at him in a slightly different light. "We will."

There was a long pause in the lab. Mark turned, expecting the Italian to have left him already. But he was still there at the bench, staring down at the wax carving in his hand.

"I trust that you will take good care of him when I am gone?" he asked without looking up.

Mark grimaced and blinked. Lucio was reading his mind now?

"Of course," Mark Andrew told him, but he didn't want a repeat of the morning's honesty session. "Have you seen Paddy?" He changed the subject.

"He's probably up in the kitchen stuffing himself right now with manicotti and cannaloni and pesto sauce. Oh, God, I could eat one of Sam's horses!" Lucio moaned and held his stomach. "I wonder what Merry has planned for our… repast."

"Who knows?" Mark tried to sound flippant, but Lucio's misery was spilling over into all the nooks and crannies, adding to the old lab's collection of woes. "We moight as well get it over with, Brother."

They heard Merry's voice drifting down through the cellar.

"Supper's on!"

Mark Andrew nodded to Lucio and raised both eyebrows. "Supper's on, Brother."

"After you, Brother." Lucio stepped back and held out one hand.

They were pleasantly surprised. Merry had cooked supper for them herself and though the fare was a bit foreign to them, they didn't care. She served them huge bowls of great northern beans and rice. White bread without the crust. Baked potatoes with mozzarella cheese and white pepper and chopped onions. And for dessert, angel food cake, vanilla ice cream and whipped cream. They ate everything without complaint. And wished for more, but there was the little clause about over-indulgence, gluttony. The food satisfied their hunger much more than breakfast had done. When the closing prayers were over, Merry stood up.

"I have to talk to Michele," she announced and Mark raised one eyebrow. "After that, I have to take my bath and then we'll talk some more and say our conjurations and confessions. By then, hopefully, Simon will be here."

Mark and Lucio watched her go.

"You spoke with Marco?" Mark Andrew turned a quizzical gaze on the Italian.

"Yes," Lucio nodded.

"Did he listen?" Mark was skeptical.

"I think so. I think Paddy is waiting outside with that white wine, Brother. I could use a little lift."

Mark Andrew nodded. There was another problem developing with Michele and he didn't even want to think about it.

Paddy was waiting for them on the patio with two bottles of chilled white wine. He opened the bottles for them and filled two glasses.

"I hate t' leave good comp'ny, but I have t' take care o' something, lads." He bowed to them and clamped his pipe between his teeth. They sat down at the glass-topped table and watched him hurry back to the house.

Mark Andrew picked up the glass of clear liquid and held it up to the moon to peruse it thoughtfully. He didn't like white wine, but he drank it

anyway. He waited in vain for the warm feeling that Scotch usually brought.

Lucio sat sipping his drink in silence.

"Michele wants to leave, Brother," Mark Andrew said after a moment, though he didn't want to. He needed someone to talk to, even Lucio would do.

"Really?" Lucio turned his head slowly to look at the Knight of Death. "For how long?"

"Forever." Mark looked away from him.

"No," Lucio objected and shook his head. "She doesn't."

"Yes… she does," Mark Andrew said and turned a baleful glance on the Knight of the Golden Eagle. "I'll have to talk to John Paul."

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Paddy hurried down the hall and up the stairs. He caught Merry just before she knocked on Michele and John Paul's door.

"Wait, Miss Merry," he whispered urgently.

Merry lowered her hand and frowned at him. She was on a tight schedule now and she had to talk to Michele. It was urgent. Her stomach was in knots and she had no idea what she might say. How could she speak to her about such things? She could never tell her daughter-in-law what she was thinking. There had to be other options. She would address the problem to the Grand Master. He would know the answer. Surely he had experienced something similar in his long life.

"What is it, Paddy?" she asked as he pulled her along the hall. He dragged her to Mark Andrew's room and opened the door.

"What are we doing?" She looked about as he pulled her inside and closed the door. She hadn't been in the room since Mark Andrew had given her his sword to sleep with.

"Ye were goin' t' talk t' th' lassie aboot leavin' Midlothien?" he asked when he turned around. The room was dark and the light of the full moon glimmered through the sheer panels between the darker drapes on either side of the windows.

"Yes."

"Don't. Let me, Paddy, take care o' it."

"But you don't understand," Merry said miserably.

"Oh, Paddy understands, lassie." His eyes gleamed in the dimness. "Paddy understands quoite well."

"John Paul asked me to speak to her. It's a matter of…" she began.

"I know wot it's aboot," Paddy cut her off. "Trust me, Merry. Let it be."

"But…" Merry protested.

"Let it be!" Paddy told her again and then held out his hand to her. She took his hand and he smiled up at her. "Thair's no use worryin' aboot it now. It's too late in th' game."

Merry nodded, but she had promised John Paul. Her heart was breaking for him.

"Ye'd best go and take yer bath. Th' lads air waitin' fer ye out on th' yard," Paddy reminded her.

She allowed him to shoo her out of the room. He stood in the open door watching her until she finally closed the door of her own room.

Chapter Seven of Seventeen
To know wisdom and instruction

Simon d'Ornan arrived right on time for Merry's speech to Mark Andrew and Lucio. She had them sitting on the sofa in the library again like small boys at nursery school. They looked a bit flushed from their stay on the patio, but they were paying close attention to her... it seemed.

When Simon let himself into the library and stood looking at them silently, all three got up at once to greet him in the Templar fashion, hugging him and kissing him lightly on the lips. They hadn't heard him come in. He almost cringed when Merry touched him and did cringe when Lucio Dambretti greeted him, but there seemed to be no lingering malice in the Knight of the Golden Eagle and Simon was greatly relieved.

"Please sit down, Brother." Merry smiled and waved him over to sit by Mark Andrew. "I was just about to begin."

Simon sat stiffly on the sofa and clasped his hands over his stomach. He leaned back against the cool leather and almost closed his eyes. He was past exhaustion and his eyes drooped.

"Now…" Merry said and sat down on the footstool facing them. "There will be a circle and each of you will be responsible for certain items which I will give you to carry. I will instruct you in what you will do with the objects and you must do exactly… exactly as I command when I say. Is that clear?"

They nodded in unison. Simple.

"Before we commence the ceremony, there will be a cleansing bath and suffumigation. You know what that is?" she asked.

"Suffumigation," Simon repeated the word. "Incense."

"Yes. Exactly," Merry nodded. "No problem, right?"

They all shook their heads in unison.

"I will give each of you separate and individual instruction concerning your proper duties. Probably tomorrow. Today is the first day. Tomorrow is the second day. Thursday will be the third day and then on Friday morning, the first hour after sunrise, we will conduct the ceremony."

They all nodded. Lucio yawned and stretched. "You did fast, didn't you, Brother?" he asked Simon and the priest nodded.

"And you ate white food?" Mark asked him hopefully.

"White food?" Simon frowned and then looked at Merry. "I didn't eat anything."

"Nothing?" Lucio looked at him doubtfully.

"Fasting means not eating." Simon turned a surprised look on the Italian.

"You can't starve for three days, mon! Ye'll nae be able t' stand on yer feet!" Mark Andrew admonished him. "Merry, do ye still have some o' those beans out in th' kitchen?" Mark was truly concerned.

"It's no problem," Simon almost laughed. He had never been as fond of eating as his Brothers. Sometimes he even forgot to eat at all.

"I'll check on it. Tonight, I will see each of you in private. I want to know that there will be no problems. I don't want to get down to the last detail and then have one of you back out."

Mark Andrew sighed and shook his head slightly. What was the big deal? He had been through many things. Certainly, this would be no more taxing than living as a dragon for twenty-one years and drinking nothing but water. Merry was worried for nothing. He wished they could just get on with it without all this waiting. Just do the conjuring or whatever it was and be done with it. Simple.

Lucio crossed his legs and spread his arms along the back of the sofa before smiling at her. He had no intention of backing out. Anything Mark Andrew could do, he could do. He could tolerate it and then he would be gone. They would find out where Lucia Simone was and he would be off to retrieve his daughter. Simple.

Simon wore a worried frown. What was so disturbing about this thing that Merry had to keep warning them that they could not back out? What was she so concerned about? Just what did this ceremony entail? Sacrificing water buffaloes and chickens? He had just had a terrifying nightmare on the plane from Italy wherein he was in a dark place with thousands of rats and someone had thrown a chicken at him. A chicken! Of all things! It had almost been laughable after he had awakened, but it had been very frightening at the time. He'd never dreamed of chickens and he'd rarely dreamed of rats. That was more along the lines of something Mark Andrew would dream. Mark Andrew hated rats! The only encounter

he'd had with rats was when he had been in the Inquisitor's dungeon and the rats had been the least of his worries there. He hoped that he would be able to get through this thing intact and then get back to France. He wanted to check on Orri and then plan his trip to America. Go to America. That was what his dreams told him to do. God was speaking to him surely, calling him out of this impossible situation and giving him a new direction. He would help Merry as he had promised and then he would be gone. Simple, except that he would have to try to speak to John Paul about the Ark before he left.

Merry was speaking again and he had missed what she was saying.

"Simon?" She held out her hand and he took it immediately, hoping that he had not missed too much. She pulled him up and he allowed her to escort him from the room. He glanced back at Mark Andrew and the Knight of Death smiled at him and raised both eyebrows. Mark Andrew did not understand what was happening here. Lucio sat gazing at him blandly.

Merry pulled Simon along the hallway to the backdoor and outside into the moonlight. She led him down the walk to the patio and he paused beside the flowerbeds he had tended with such care for so long. The amaranths, violets and lilies were gone now. They had been replaced by crocuses. Red crocuses. They were very dark, but the moonlight was so brilliant, he could see that they were red. He wondered vaguely why there would be red crocuses in his garden and then realized that it was not his garden, had never truly been his garden. Merry led him to the glass-topped table and pushed him into the chair.

"Thank you for coming, Brother," she said and smiled at him in the moonlight and he thought he would have to leave. He even started to get up and she pushed him back down. "Sit."

He sat down and looked about nervously, placing one hand over his mouth.

"Now I have to know that you will be suitable for this… experiment," she told him. "Now listen to what I have to say and then we'll see."

"We'll see?" He looked up at her and gave her a small smile.

"I am the master of this Art," she began. "I beseech thee, I beg thee, I cajole thee that thou now by thy consent of thy free will submit thyself to my will in all things pertaining to this Art and by submitting that thou shalt set thy trust in me to perform only those things which shall be necessary to accomplish the purpose of this experiment and this invocation and this

conjuration before God Almighty and to all His angels and all His power and majesty that by putting aside thy selfish interests thou shalt adhere to thy promise wherein thou claimest no will other than mine. By placing your hand in mine thou shalt seal this pact with me before God."

She held out her hand and Simon sat looking at her, blinking rapidly. He raised his hand slowly and then put it in hers.

Merry had not expected anything to happen when she took his hand, but she began to see images immediately, as if his mind was emptying into hers. She saw an old black woman in a bed with a trickle of blood running from her nose and then she saw Mark Andrew lying in the cave after he had ignited the gas in the dragon's lair. After that, she saw Louis Champlain with an arrow through his arm and then the Ritter von Hetz suffering from a terrible slash across his ribs. The visions continued and with each changing scene, she saw a different person with some terrible wound or injury. Some of them she recognized as the Knights of the Council. Some of them were strangers to her. With each glimpse, she felt the pain of each man, very briefly. Each time, she jerked back slightly on his hand, but did not let go. The images passed like still frame photos or a rapidly paced slide show. There and then gone.

Simon was fascinated. He could not let go of her hand. He could see her thoughts about him. He could see how much she loved him and how much she respected him and trusted him and honored him and revered him, but he could see that there was nothing more than the love of a friend for a friend and a sister for a brother, but he had never expected her to care so much for him in any manner. It was most gratifying and very enlightening and, at the same time, disappointing in a selfish sort of way. Then he saw something he did not want to see. He saw her feelings for Mark Andrew and then her feelings for Lucio. She let go of his hand and it was over.

She stood staring at him in the moonlight, her expression like none he had ever seen. She looked as if she had seen a ghost… no, perhaps hundreds of them.

"Are you all right, Sister?" he asked. He wondered if she knew what he had seen and then wondered if she had been able to see his feelings for her. His face went deep red. "I'm sorry."

"For what?" she asked. "I had no idea, Simon. You really are a magnificent soul, a Healer."

“I am?” He looked about and then sighed in relief. It had not been a mutual sight and he was thankful.

“Yes. I believe you will do quite well for the experiment,” she breathed and sat down in one of the chairs next to him to catch her breath. “Give me a minute.”

Simon sat looking up at the moon. It looked like the same moon they had seen in the underworld and just for a moment he could almost imagine the sounds of the spirits’ drums and the laughter of the elves. He longed to return there with her, but it was only a dream now, lost to history, but never lost to him.

“Would you please go and send Mark Andrew out?” She reached out hesitantly to touch his arm and he jumped.

((((((((((((<O>))))))))))))

Al Sajek al Hafiz dropped his water goblet on the table and spilled water into his lap. He stood up quickly and one of his servants came immediately to hand him a towel before cringing away from him as if expecting to be struck dead for allowing such a calamity to happen. He wiped at the water and then sat back down heavily. He had seen something unbidden. Flashes of things from somewhere else. Someone’s mind. Whose mind? He had seen an old black woman, a man with an arrow in his arm and another man with a wound on his ribs and more and he had felt their pain briefly. What was this? Was someone now sending him their thoughts? Could it be possible? He wore the amulet of Nodens. He was protected from such things. His first thought was the prophet, John Paul. He was the only one capable of such a thing. He left his meal unfinished and went into his chambers and closed the doors.

He sat in the middle of the floor on a satin cushion filled with goose down and stretched out his arms on either side of his body. The golden cup from the chapel sat on a small pedestal in front of him. He focused his concentration on the prophet.

John Paul was lying on his bed in his father’s house and his wife was sleeping next to him. The priest was not asleep. He was staring up at the underside of a canopy bed. His mind was full of turmoil. He was trying

desperately not to sleep. More chaos. Good, but this was not what he expected. The images had not come from the priest. The Magician dropped his arms and frowned. This would take more work.

((((((((((((<O>))))))))))))

Merry stood up when Mark Andrew exited the back door of the house. He stopped on the steps and looked about before walking out the brick sidewalk toward the patio. He looked like a dream in the moonlight, but she had to shake off the thought of how much she simply wanted to go to him and take him back upstairs…

"Merry." He nodded to her when he drew near and smiled slightly.

He did not understand the gravity of the situation. In fact, he looked rather sheepish and nervous, as if they were having some sort of secret rendezvous. For once, she wished that his usual somber self would take over. It almost seemed as if he thought all this was some sort of joke.

"Sit down, please, Mark," she said a bit too curtly and his smile faded.

He took the chair vacated by Simon and frowned at her.

"I need to see if you can be serious about this. I want to know your true feelings. Would you like to back out now?"

"No." He shook his head and the silver earrings in his hair jingled. He reached up to place one hand on them subconsciously.

Merry began to repeat the same invocation she had said to Simon. As she spoke, he began to smile again. These were not baneful words. Not witchcraft. Not some horrible secret words of darkness. Just a request for his willingness to obey her. He had no problem with making a pact with her. He was planning, after all, to marry her very soon and was that not the ultimate pact? When she reached for his hand, he took hers readily. The shock of what he saw rocked him back in the chair.

The first thing he saw was Simon sitting on a great white horse looking down at him. "Why would you murder your Brother? Why would you murder your love? Why would I murder you, Brother?" He held his sword up in a salute before riding away. Then Lucio appeared on a dark horse. The Italian bowed his head slightly and then pulled his silver sword from its scabbard. "I am not the source of your pain, Brother. I have

forgiven you. You must forgive yourself." He pressed the sword's hilt against his heart and looked away across the horizon. The Knight kicked the horse and also rode away.

The next image truly fascinated him. Another horse galloped toward him and on it sat a Templar Knight in full uniform and armor. At first, he thought it was Luke Matthew again and that he was about to hear more of his long-dead brother's prophetic words, but as the horse drew nearer, the Knight smiled at him and he saw the white braid in his long, dark hair and the silver earrings. He smiled up at his own image. He pulled in on the reins and drew up beside himself. It was an odd feeling, like being in two places at once. He reached under his surcoat and pulled out a single red rose and handed it down to himself. "Keep true to yourself, Mark Andrew Ramsay. Don't lose sight of your ultimate goal. What your Brothers do, they do for love." Mark Andrew took the rose and looked down at it. When he looked up, he saw himself riding away.

Merry thought she was prepared for what she would see, but nothing could have prepared her for what poured into her mind. These images came much faster than the one's from Simon's mind. They were briefer and more numerous and much more horrible than wounded or injured people. The first image was Sir Philip losing his head in Mark Andrew's entry hall. Then she saw many more such scenes so quickly she could hardly keep them in order. She saw Argonne, Champagne, Devereaux, the man in the blue turban in front of the chapel, Beaujold, the other Benedictine priest at Ian McShan's house, Maxie on the hillside in Texas, a soldier in a Nazi uniform, a beautiful blonde woman, another Knight in full uniform, a man dressed in army fatigues, and then more and more and more. Most were men. Some were women. The greater majority were men dressed in the far eastern garb with turbans and dark eyes and long beards. By the time she let go of Mark's hand she was crying uncontrollably. He pulled her close and held her head against his chest, stroking her hair and asking her again and again what was wrong. She wouldn't tell him. She couldn't speak. He led her over to one of the rockers and made her sit down. After a few moments, she wiped her eyes and frowned down at her hands.

"I'm sorry, Mark," she said and looked up at him. Did he really have all these things in his mind? How could he live with these memories?

"For what?" he asked and shook his head again. The earrings jangled in his hair. "What happened?"

“Nothing,” she lied and then crossed herself.

“No lies,” he reminded her and smiled, but the smile was sad somehow as if he could feel her pain. “I’m sorry that you have to put up with me, Meredith. I don’t have much to offer.”

“You’re right. No lies,” she cut him off and returned his smile. “Just don’t ask me.”

He kissed the back of her hand and then pressed it against his face.

“I need to see Lucio,” she said quietly. “It’s getting late and I’m in danger of losing control.”

This was not going to be easy. She had thought that the hard part was yet to come. If it was any worse than this, she might not make it.

Mark dropped her hand and his shoulders drooped a bit. He scratched his head and then ran his fingers through his hair.

“I’ll send him out,” he said.

They still had to make their nightly confession according to the rite and repeat the required prayers before going to bed. The thought of the underworld came back to her and for a moment, she almost wished that she could go back there with Simon. Surely, it would be a wonderful place with the evil spirits gone and the serpent dead. She even missed the rich flavor of the fresh milk and the wonderful bread that had appeared on their doorstep everyday. What a simple life it could have been for them. And she could think of no better person than Simon to have been stranded with. Well, at least, the old Simon had been the perfect companion. She didn’t know about the new Simon.

((((((((((((<O>))))))))))))

Al Sajek was astounded! He had been about to lie down for a nap when he had been slapped in the face with the sight of dying men and women. Some of them beheaded, some of them with slashed throats or other hideous wounds. Blood. Blood. And more blood! At first, they were westerners in modern attire and then he had taken a plummet through history as the faces changed and the clothing the victims wore changed to more and more ancient attire. In the end, he had stood stock still watching

as a great many men and even a few women dressed similar to his own countrymen, were slain. Then he saw other things, more terrifying.

He pressed his hands to his temples and let out a great howl before sinking to his knees, shaking and perspiring. These were images of death of a particularly gruesome and yet, methodically recognizable form. They were coming from Mark Ramsay's head! He was seeing all the men and women the Knight of Death had slain in his long life. It was overwhelming! It was terrible! He could not abide it. Killing was not his forte. Killing was best left to the brute soldiers who lived for nothing better than to serve their Lords and Masters. Some of the same things he had sent to Ramsay's son had come back to him only worse.

He snapped his fingers and smiled. How could he have forgotten the most basic of laws regarding sorcery and the practice thereof? The Law of Three. If one is not powerful enough, if one is not careful enough, one had best be prepared to reap the whirlwind. He had sent an ancient curse upon the prophet and now he was receiving it back threefold. But how could this be? What was happening? He was confident in his protective magick. He had underestimated someone, it seemed. Whom?

He got up slowly and went to sprawl across his luxuriously appointed bed where he hid his head under his arms. This would not do at all! He would have to locate the source of this trouble and banish it. He thought perhaps the ancient Queen had found him and was tormenting him for disturbing her. But it was not he who had disturbed her. The Templars had awakened her and yet it had been his fault they were there in the first place. The dragon he had made without her permission… Yes, that must be it. The Templars would suffer long and hard for waking her. He would ensure it, and perhaps she would forgive him. His heart quaked. They knew nothing of her!

((((((((((((<O>))))))))))))

Merry stood up and tried to maintain her composure as Lucio walked down the path from the house to the patio. He did not carry himself in the same manner as Mark Andrew. He seemed a bit more cautious as if he

expected some sort of ambush from unseen forces. He looked up at the moon and she could see its light reflected in his dark eyes.

"Where do you want me?" he asked when he stopped in front of her.

Her heart skipped a beat. He was like a stranger to her now. It was as if they had never been married. As if they had never known each other at all. She remembered him asking this question before under completely different circumstances with completely different meaning.

"Here." She pointed at one of the chairs and he took a seat. He would not look at her now that they were alone. He stared away across the meadow as if looking for someone or something… to save him?

"This experiment is very serious, Brother," she began. "I need to know if I can…"

"Merry," he said and suddenly reached for her hand, surprising her. He turned his eyes on hers and the words froze in her throat. How could she love two men, two totally different men with the same intensity? She closed her eyes and wondered what would ever become of them.

"I want you to know that I have made peace with myself concerning you and… Brother Ramsay. I know now that it was all a useless endeavor. There was only one purpose served by what I did and now it's time for me to let go. I have to separate myself from him. I don't know if you can understand this, but I believe that I had myself confused with him for a very long time. I think he was my god and I think that I am more jealous of him than you. Do you understand?"

"I think so. Maybe," Merry nodded. She didn't want to hear this. She didn't want him to let go. Selfish. Selfish love. What did she plan to do? Keep one in the pantry at all times and switch out when things became too intense to handle?

"Go ahead with your… whatever it is, Sister. I'm sorry. I just had to say that."

He smiled at her and she had to close her eyes again. Don't look at him. She crossed herself and heard him sigh. When she opened her eyes, he was looking away across the meadow again.

"I am the master of this Art," she began the invocation for the third time. When she had finished, he sat staring at her from his deep, brown eyes. For a moment she thought he was about to refuse her hand.

"Do you know anything about the name Obakoso?" he asked and she was taken aback.

"No." She frowned at the unexpected question.

"All right," he said and took her hand, but then jerked it back. "Wait." He frowned down at his hand.

"Have you changed your mind?" she asked him.

"No." He shook his head. "Won't you say that again for me?"

Merry raised one eyebrow and repeated the invocation. This time he took her hand readily and held it much too tightly. He seemed to shimmer and then glow in front of her and she was amazed at what she saw. He was surrounded by a glowing light that stayed very close to the surface of his skin. It was a golden light with silver flashes here and there like the tiny sparks emitted by the magnesium sparklers she had played with as a child. His eyes were blue and his hair seemed white or silver. She smelled cinnamon or cloves and tasted something sweet like almond paste or perhaps even chocolate in her mouth. What was it?

She closed her eyes, but the image was still there. She was seeing Lucio's soul! It was unnerving. She opened her eyes and blinked at him. The light was gone and his appearance was back to normal. The taste of chocolate almonds was still in her mouth. As he held onto her hand, he seemed to be in a trance.

"Lucio?" She leaned toward him. "Lucio!"

"He really is in love with you!" Lucio blinked at her and smiled a different kind of smile filled with wonder and disbelief.

"Who is?" Merry backed away when he let go of her hand. This was not good. Now he would be going after Simon again.

"The Mad Arab!" Lucio slapped his hand on his thigh and laughed. "The fool thinks you are the Queen of Babylon! And I remember once that von Hetz called you the whore of Babylon!"

"Lucio!" She was shocked by this remark. She was astounded by his attitude.

"Don't worry, Sister," Lucio regained his composure and stood up. "That was a long time ago. Before the Ritter knew you. Before you joined the Council. He was only doing his job by scaring all of us men of lesser moral character. This could put a whole new light on things. I have to tell Mark."

"Lucio!" Merry reached for his arm, but he was already gone. She stood speechless, looking after him. "Wait! What are you talking about?"

He turned to look back at her with a peculiar look on his face. “If you truly don’t remember, then it is not my place to remind you. It’s probably best that you don’t know and it helps me. So I will have to be content with that. I will keep the secret in my heart. You really should watch yourself, Meredith. The world is a dangerous place.”

The Knight of the Golden Eagle stuffed his hands in his pockets and walked rapidly back toward the house.

((((((((((((<O>))))))))))))

Al Sajek was in the midst of deep sleep when he saw the face of a stranger. Someone he was familiar with, yet not. It was one of the Knights of the Temple of Solomon. The one called the Golden Eagle, but some sort of fog or veil of golden mist surrounded him. The very same man who had taken his beloved as his wife! Insolent bastard! When he tried to focus on the man’s face, the Knight smiled at him contemptuously and then disappeared. Al Sajek bellowed again in frustration and sat up in the bed, clawing the air in front of him. The Knight’s unwelcome appearance had disturbed a wonderful dream he was having about Semiramis.

((((((((((((<O>))))))))))))

The Ritter von Hetz walked quietly down the long tiled corridor of the hospital just outside the ancient city of Prague. He had come to see for himself. The letter from the couple who had taken on raising John Paul Sinclair-Ramsay’s child had been most disturbing. They had asked him to take the boy off their hands. They said they could no longer keep him at home and that they could not afford the medical bills. Medical bills? If the child were immortal, why would he have medical bills? The nurse attendant’s keys jangled at his belt and echoed in the long dimly lit corridor. The sounds of a child crying drifted to his ears. His spirits had

drooped when the hospital staff had directed him to the psychiatric wing. Then they had bottomed out when he'd been subjected to a search and taken through a number of high security gates to the fortress like area where the most violently insane patients were housed.

They stopped in front of yet another locked door and the man paused before unlocking it, looking up at him curiously.

"How long would you stay, sir?" the man asked him.

"Just a few minutes," von Hetz muttered and then stepped inside the room. He heard the door being locked behind him. Two small lights burned in covered wells near the floor on either side of the high bed. The rails were up and the child in the bed lay on his back staring at the ceiling. His wrists were wrapped with nylon straps with lambskin pads and secured to the railing. Von Hetz drew in a sharp breath at the sight of his face. It was covered with scratches. Dark circles under his eyes were exaggerated by the pale color of his face and the lack of lighting in the room. The boy turned his light blue eyes on him and blinked slowly. He was the very image of John Paul at the age von Hetz had first seen the young prophet. What had happened to him?

"My son?" von Hetz placed one hand on the rail of the bed and frowned down at the boy.

The child said nothing. He simply gazed at him with a blank expression as if he did not even see him.

The boy rolled his head back on the pillow to look up at the ceiling again. The Ritter touched his hand and he tried to jerk it away in spite of the bindings. Von Hetz picked up the sheet and the boy began to bang the back of his head on the pillow. There were more scratches on his neck and his chest. He looked as if he had been in a fight with half a dozen alley cats.

"What have you done to yourself, my son?" von Hetz asked him. The boy continued to bang his head against the pillow. He opened his mouth and began to make noises.

"La, la, la, la, la, la." He accented each sound with a bang of his head. Konrad tried to 'see' the boy's thoughts, but there was complete and total chaos in his mind. He withdrew quickly and dropped the sheet back in place, then went to knock on the door.

He walked alongside the nurse silently.

“How long has he been like that?” the Ritter asked the man when they were away from the door.

“He has been unresponsive ever since his parents brought him here.” The man shrugged. “The wounds are self-inflicted. Every time we take off the restraints, he begins to claw at himself and scream. Would you like to verify that?” The nurse sounded defensive.

“No!” Von Hetz looked at the man sharply. He did not like this place. This was no place for a child. “I will be moving him to Switzerland as soon as possible. There are… some doctors there I would wish to see him.”

“His doctor will be glad to hear it.” The man was totally unsympathetic. “The boy is hopeless. He doesn’t know what to do with such a case. There are more urgent needs here. We are wasting our time and effort with this one child and his parents haven’t paid a cent as I understand it.”

Von Hetz spun on the man and took him by the collar, slamming him against the wall.

“Mind your tongue, fool!” Von Hetz leaned into his face. “If you value your job here, sir, you will have some respect!”

“Sorry.” The man jerked away from him and straightened his collar indignantly. “I meant no insult, sir. It’s just that there are many children in Prague in need of help and this one is beyond our means to help here. He is taking up valuable space.”

Von Hetz nodded and turned on his heel to head for the exit. It was worse than he had expected. Much worse. The letters had been becoming more and more disheartening, describing the progress of the boy, or, rather, the non-progress of the child. He was autistic or at least, he had become autistic at the ripe old age of three. Up until that point, he had been a happy baby, receiving glowing reports from the parents, full of praise and colorful descriptions of the child’s adventures and accomplishments with pictures and even a few videos of his birthday parties and such. But then, without any explanation, the boy had suddenly began to deteriorate until finally, the parents could do nothing with him. Now he was totally incapacitated, strapped in a bed for his own protection. Von Hetz shook his head and drew a deep breath before stepping out into the pre-dawn air. He would be obligated to report this to the Grand Master and he dreaded it.

((((((((((((<O>))))))))))))

"Michele, lassie!" Paddy called as he bounded into the kitchen where Michele was cutting up a chicken in the sink. "Put down thot bard and come with me!"

Michele laughed at the clurichaun. "I have to make lunch for John Paul and Uncle Louis and Marco. Not to mention you!"

"Weeell now, thot chicken looks a moight scrawny fer such a number o' diners, don't ye think?" He eyed the chicken doubtfully. "I thought pr'aps ye wud be of a moind t' take Paddy into town. I wud need t' pick up a few bottles o' whoite wine. Me stock's runnin' a bit low on th' whoite and thot's oll Merry will allow th' lads t' drink. They'll be getting' a moight crotchety if thair's nothin' t' be 'ad."

Michele glanced up at the clock and looked down at the chicken. It could wait. She put it back in the refrigerator.

"I suppose we could take a quick run into town," she said as she washed her hands and dried them on her apron. "Do I look all right?" She turned around and around for him and he nodded before clamping his pipe between his teeth. She and the clurichaun had become the best of friends. He made her laugh with his unabashed flatteries and he loved Marco.

"Ye're as luvly as a spring mornin', lassie," he said with a twinkle in his bright blue eyes. "Me auld ticker is 'ard-pressed t' keep up withee."

"All right, then. Let's go."

A few moments later they were headed down the highway in John Paul's Mercedes. Paddy sat on a pillow in the passenger seat, craning his short neck over the door to peer out across the Scottish landscape.

"Scotland is a beautiful country," Michele commented as they passed the stone fences lining the meadows where sheep and cows grazed on the deep green grass.

"Not as beautiful as Ireland," Paddy told her with deep solemnity and then turned his eyes on her. "Not as beautiful as ye air, lassie."

"Oh, Paddy," she said sadly. "You're such a fine liar."

"Nooo." Paddy shook his head and rolled the window down a bit. "Fresh air. Thot's wot we need. Fresh air."

"I love the smell of the meadows in the summer," she said wistfully. "There's nothing like this where I come from. Just houses, parking lots, buildings and more buildings and people! People everywhere. Too many people, Paddy."

"I know wot ye mean, gurl," he agreed. "People can be th' nastiest creatures, don't ye think?"

"Oh, yes. They can certainly be nasty at times."

"But thair air some very koind souls around aboot." Paddy returned his attention to the pastures.

"You're talking about John Paul now," she said.

"Ye're remarkably perceptive, Michele." He looked at her again and tugged on the sleeves of his yellow plaid jacket. "Aye, twas Johnny I was speakin' of."

"You really don't know him very well," she said, but kept her eyes on the road.

"'e's not 'ard to know, Michele. Just a wee bit 'ard t' talk to," Paddy said lightly.

"Oh, he's not hard to talk to. He's hard to understand. I never know what he's thinking or why he does the things he does. He's been having nightmares recently. He's never had nightmares before. He's quite… unmanageable," she said softly. "He frightens me now."

"How so?" Paddy used Mark Andrew's favorite words.

"He becomes… violent." She lowered her head and looked through the windshield intently.

"In 'is sleep?" Paddy raised both eyebrows.

"Yes," she answered.

"Michele, ye canna 'old it against 'im. 'e loves ye more than 'is own life, lassie. 'e wud nevar do anything to 'arm ye. 'e's beatin' 'imself t' death now because ye won't talk to 'im aboot it. Ye need t' give 'im th' chance t' do th' confession thing 'e loikes t' do and then it'll be oll roight."

"But why?" She turned to look at him. "I love him more than my own life, Paddy! And now he's one of them and he's changed. He's just like them now. He's violent and he's full of something I never saw in him before. It's like they've taken him over and destroyed the John Paul I knew. He never smiles any more like he used to and he's not innocent like he used to be. I don't know him any more."

"Yes ye do," Paddy insisted and then looked about suddenly. "Stop th' contraption, gurl! Thair's wot I wud want ye t' see!"

Michele pulled over on the side of the road and Paddy opened the door. He got out of the car and ran around to open her door as well.

"C'mon!" He grabbed her arm and pulled her from the car. He dragged her across the shallow ditch and out to the stone fence where several of the rocks had tumbled down, making a low place in the barrier. She stepped up over the rocks, holding onto the ancient stones with one hand and Paddy's hand with the other. "Look 'ee, thair!" Paddy pointed when they had topped the fence. A long, winding swath of dark green grass trailed off through the lighter grasses and wild flowers. "D'ye see it?"

"Yes," Michele nodded. "What is it? I've always wondered about those."

"It's a faery path. Th' troopin' faeries use these paths when they go aboot their nightly Rades," Paddy told her and pulled her along.

"Faeries!" Michele laughed, but allowed him to pull her along the dark green trail. "Now you sound like John Paul's father and Uncle Lucio."

"Ye dunna believe in faeries, lassie?" the clurichaun asked and looked up at her quizzically.

"Oh, I've heard the others talking, Paddy," Michele told him. "Faeries are for children like Marco. They are talking about evil spirits and demons."

"Oh, nooo. I dunna think so." Paddy shook his head as they hurried along.

"Where are we going?" Michele looked back at the car still sitting near the highway. She had left the keys and her purse there. The doors were unlocked. But this was Scotland, not New York.

"Ye'll see," Paddy laughed and continued up and over a low rise. At the bottom of the next vale was a circular spot of dark green and in the middle was a mound of rock and earth and in the middle of the rocks was one of the tall Celtic crosses that littered the ancient landscape. A priceless relic from thousands of years ago. In America, it would have been protected by a fifteen-foot fence and three armed guards to keep the tourists from destroying it piece by piece and carting it away as souvenirs. The 'faery path' went down to the cross, and then continued on and up over the next swell.

They practically ran down the path to the mound of rocks and then stopped to look up at the ancient stone monument. Its face was covered entirely with strange runes and pictures carved in deep relief. Someone had worked very hard to make the elegant work of art just to set it up here in the middle of nowhere for no apparent reason.

"'ere ye go, gurl." Paddy held out one hand and took his pipe from his pocket. He pulled out his gold lighter and held the flame, which burned with a strange blue glow to the bowl. The aromatic smell of the tobacco filled the air. "'ave a seat and rest fer a whoile."

"Rest?!" she laughed at him. "Paddy Puffingtowne! We have to get back! I have to cook dinner and they'll be wondering where I've run off to. What if John Paul finds out I've run off to the meadows with another man?"

"Flattery will get ye evra wair!" Paddy winked at her. "Now just do as Paddy says. Sit down thair and close yer eyes. It'll be worth th' tribble. I promise ye."

"All right. Just for a minute," she said and took a seat on one of the flat boulders, carefully folding her pink skirt under her.

As soon as she closed her eyes, she heard the sound of music. Bagpipes and drums and whistles. It was the sweetest music she had ever heard. A light breeze ruffled her hair and she opened her eyes to comment on the music in wonder, but she was even more amazed at what she saw when she opened her eyes. Paddy stood smiling at her and puffing on his pipe, but they were no longer in the meadow. She was sitting on the steps of a small stone cottage. A rough-hewn wooden fence surrounded the yard. Beyond the fence was another meadow stretching away to the horizon, full of red, blue and yellow wildflowers alive with bees. The music continued, accompanied by the sound of birds. She looked about and saw a rustic stone water well and a great mulberry tree where the birds were fighting each other over the ripe berries.

"Paddy?" Her eyes widened. "What have you done?"

"D'ye loike it?" He waved one hand about. "Miss Merry loiked it immensely."

"She did?" Michele turned to look back at the house behind her. It was made of stone and had deep-set windows with wavy glass panes and a big green door.

“Aye. When ye’re toired of Scotland, ye can come here. Things air different here. Oll ye ’ave t’ do is tell Paddy when ye’re ready and this will be waitin’ fer ye.”

Michele frowned and then blinked. When she opened her eyes again, they were back in the pasture beneath the Celtic cross.

“Come on, gurl.” Paddy held out his hand. “We’d best be getting’ on t’ town fer th’ stock and then back ’ome before they miss us. Ye’d best take Paddy’s advoice and talk to yer ’usband. ’e deserves a break, Michele. And so do you.”

Chapter Eight of Seventeen

I will make known my words unto you.

Simon did not want to go down to the lab where Lucio and Mark Andrew were working on Marco's sword. He did not want to disturb Marco and Louis in the library while Louis was giving the boy some kind of history lesson and he found no one in the kitchen. He was searching for John Paul, but he didn't want to ask anyone where the prophet was because he didn't want anyone to know he was looking for him. He had to ask about the Ark and he wanted to get it over with. He didn't see Merry anywhere, when he made his way outside to the patio, nor did he see Michele or the old gardener. It was a beautiful day. The sun reflected off the red crocuses in the flowerbeds, almost blinding in their crimson brilliance.

Red was not one of his favorite colors, but the flowers were magnificent. He sauntered over to look at the stone monument he had built in the patio. The silver and copper Seal of Solomon and six-pointed Star of David was still there though a bit tarnished, but in no way diminished in its startling contrast against the black rock. He plucked one of the crocuses from the garden and then walked to the edge of the patio to look out over the meadow to where the horrid red serpent had emerged from the ground. He grimaced and squinted against the bright sunshine and shaded his eyes with his hands. He could barely make out the figure of someone sitting on the stones. Whoever it was had long dark hair. Had to be John Paul. Mark Andrew was in the basement. Simon twirled the flower between his thumb and forefinger and started off across the meadow toward the solitary figure of the priest. This would be the perfect place to speak with him concerning the Ark, far from the prying ears and eyes of others.

When he drew near, he heard John Paul's voice drifting across the space between them. He was talking to someone and Simon paused. One of the big wolfhounds sauntered out from behind a boulder and Simon sighed in relief. John Paul was talking to the dogs.

"Ho, Brother!" Simon called to him when he was a bit nearer and John Paul waved one hand at him.

The hounds came out to meet him and then followed him back to the rocks where he took a seat near John Paul's feet.

"You come here often?" Simon squinted up at the prophet.

"No." John Paul shook his head. He looked deeply troubled.

"Is something wrong here?" Simon looked about the innocent looking cairn. There was no sign of anything amiss there now.

"No." Another shake of the head.

"Brother. I would ask you to tell me if you were successful in the mission we were unable to complete together before your mother and I were… lost."

John Paul nodded.

"You put the Ark where it is supposed to be?" Simon asked him point blank.

He nodded again.

"Good! That's all I needed to know." Simon leaned back on the rock and held the flower to his nose. "Something is troubling you greatly, Brother. I am feeling a bit insulted that you do not trust me enough to confide in me," he said almost casually. Simon wondered if John Paul was still suffering from the nightmares or whatever it was that was causing him so much mental anguish.

"That is not true, but yes," John Paul answered him, but did not elaborate. Simon had already refused to hear his confession. He would not try it again. Simon did not understand. And things had become worse. He had more than nightmares to confess now.

"You would need an ear?" Simon asked him, but did not look at him.

"I would," John Paul told him, but again said nothing more.

"I am free to listen, now… here," Simon said after a moment and stretched his arms over his head. "If you don't need confession, you might just need to talk. Say whatever is on your mind. It would not be my place to pass judgment on you. I am your priest as well as the others. You, of all people, know what that means."

"I have a question," John Paul said at last and Simon heard a small clunk as one of the rocks fell from John Paul's hands onto the boulder.

"Perchance I may have the answer." Simon frowned away at the woods across the meadow. He could have stayed right there forever. It was so very beautiful. He perked up a bit at the sight of John Paul's Mercedes coming along the road and up the drive. So Michele had been gone

somewhere and perhaps Merry had been with her. He watched the car pull to a stop in front of the house and then frowned again when he saw Paddy Puffingtowne tumble out of the car and go around to open the door for Michele.

"What will happen to Michele if she tries to leave us?" John Paul's voice cut through his attention, causing him to spin around on the rock to stare at John Paul. The prophet met his gaze with an intense look in his blue eyes. "Who will go after her?"

Simon's mouth fell open. This was something he had never, ever considered. No one left the Order! Only Phillipe Devereaux had been allowed to leave the Order and that had been a terrible mistake. It had proven once and for all that change was not good. Not in that respect. It could not be allowed. No one could leave the Order. She couldn't leave John Paul!

"Your face shows your thoughts, Brother," John Paul said and raised his chin slightly. "Michele is not a Templar."

"But she can't leave," Simon objected. "She can't leave you! She loves you. You love her. What's the problem?"

"She does not want to grow old in front of me, Brother," John Paul told him. "It is why I didn't want to take Philip's place. Now, there is nothing to be done about it. Do you have the answer, Father?"

"I don't have the answer," Simon said as a terrible weight descended on his soul.

He knew the penalty for Templar Knights of the Council and their apprentices if they should attempt to leave the order. He did not know what penalty might be assessed on the wife of Council Member. There had been no wives of Council members. There were no precedents. Michele knew more about them than any other non-Templar and more than most Templars among the regular ranks. But the regular ranks were not bound with the same penalty as the Council. They were constrained with certain oaths, but… it was too confusing for him. Michele had taken no oaths, no vows to the Order. She owed them nothing. She had only taken the wedding vows with John Paul. What would his father say when he learned that she was about to leave them? He could already hear the words of Guy de Lyons: 'The company of women is a dangerous thing.' God, the Order, Family. Had he asked his father about Abraham and Isaac in regard to himself or to John Paul and Michele? Why did he always think of Abraham and Isaac

when he thought of himself and his father? Would the Grand Master sacrifice his son for the Order? Would John Paul be required to sacrifice his wife for the Order? The Grand Master had expected them to sacrifice Ramsay's son for the Order and none of them, with the exception of one, would consider it. Impossible! And if it came to that, would one of them, perhaps, Mark Ramsay, Knight of Death, be called upon to sacrifice his son as well as his daughter-in-law for the Order? Impossible! These thoughts made his head hurt. Not long ago, he would have been behind the mound by now, throwing up the meager breakfast Merry had given him. They couldn't, they wouldn't. Mark would never do it.

Simon turned his attention back to the house where Louis Champlain had come out to help Michele and Paddy carry in the heavy boxes. The big, Frankish Knight hefted one on his shoulder while Marco skipped along beside him. Marco Niccolo seemed to have taken a great liking to the Knight of the Golden Key and the feeling appeared to be mutual. He could hear Marco's voice drifting across the meadow and Brother Louis' laughter. It seemed like some sort of surrealistic dream. Michele and Paddy carried the other box between them.

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"All right now," Merry was talking to Simon across the glass-topped table. "You will carry your sword and your dagger. When we get to the circle, you will handle yourself as I instruct you and then you will take up your position in the west. The task of protection will remain with you and I will consecrate the circle and exorcise it and then I'll give more instructions."

"Sounds simple enough," Simon nodded.

"There will be other things to consecrate. The fire and the incense and the pens and ink and the book and the perfumes. Mark Andrew will have the fire and the incense and he will be in the south. Lucio will stand in the east with the pen and paper. Each of you will carry your swords and after the consecrations and prayers are said, you will draw your sword and hold it pointing upright in front of you during the invocations and conjurations and all during the rite. At no time will you move from your appointed station

unless I tell you to do so or unless a spirit takes you. This is very important."

"A spirit?" Simon frowned. He did not want to be possessed or taken by a spirit. Not again!

"Don't worry. These are not evil spirits. They are the seraphim, the cherubim and the malachim. The malachim will protect us from the evil spirits that might be present outside the circle. We have to stay inside the circle just like we did at the chapel when the angels of destruction were present. You remember that, don't you?"

Simon shuddered and nodded. He remembered the fiery angels of destruction and their baleful voices quite well. He had hoped never to witness such a sight again.

"Stay inside the circle," he repeated.

"Yes," she nodded. "I will be calling upon some certain angels who will reveal to us the whereabouts of Lucia Simone. By the way, Simon, I have a question for you. It's sort of personal."

"Go ahead," he smiled wanly.

"Have you ever…healed a woman?" she asked and leaned back to look at him thoughtfully.

"A woman? Of what?" he asked and then shrugged. "No. I have never had the occasion to do that. Why do you ask? Are you injured?"

"No, Brother. Not me. I saw something in our invocation last night. When we sealed our pact." She had also seen Sir Philip's death in Mark Andrew's head. Mark Andrew had not killed Philip. John Paul had rendered the service to the Knight of the Orient. Why was the image in Mark Andrew's head?

"Oh?" he sat up straighter. This was disturbing. She had seen something of his mind after all. He felt his cheeks turning red.

"Yes. An elderly black woman. She looked very ill and she had suffered a stroke, I believe. It was very painful. Are you sure you've never healed such a person?"

"No black women and no strokes, Sister," he said adamantly. "Remember? Knights of the Council don't have strokes. They may act like they're going to have a stroke, but they can't have strokes or heart attacks or plague or even common colds."

"And so you don't use your powers to heal… outsiders then?" she asked.

"No. I would have tried with Christopher Stewart had I thought it would have worked. I am forbidden to do such things. But I can tell you this, in confidence. Your son, John Paul, possesses the healing Art as surely as I do. He healed me of my troublesome stomach. One touch of his hand and I have not suffered that infirmity since then. Like our Brother Lucio and our Brother Mark, I cannot use the power I hold on myself or else I would have cured myself long ago. Of that and other things. I believe that the one was related to the other… injury. And since that occurred before I was given the Tree of Life, it remained just as Mark Andrew's scar from the Saracen's dagger and Lucio's scar from Mark's sword. But the place where we were… I believe we were mortal there, though I have no scars from the creature's poison stick. That could be because of your magick and the elves' skills. Your Mark Andrew has scars from the dragon he fought there. That means he received no healing from the creatures that healed me. Think, Sister, how he must have suffered. All of this shakes the foundations of my beliefs as I have always known them to be. Someone, somewhere did not write the entire truth in one book. I intend to do some research on this subject. I would like to know more about our gifts and how we came to be what we are. I want to know who my father really is. I have been speaking with some people who might have some answers for me and, if you like, I will tell you what I learn as soon as I find out. As for your black woman, I know nothing of this."

"I had to ask," she said and then stood up.

Meredith did not like the sound of this. It sounded as if her priest was having second thoughts about his faith. After nearly seven hundred years, he was doubting himself and his father, the very foundations of the Order. "I would love to hear whatever you have to say Simon if you are willing to share it with me. I would be… honored. I have to go and drag Mark Andrew up here for his instruction. He's been hammering on that sword all day." They could actually hear the chinging sound of the hammer striking the new blade in Mark's laboratory even from the patio. "He's sure to have a headache by now…" She turned to look at the house and then back to frown at Simon. "What about headaches, Brother? I've often wondered why we suffer headaches."

"Headaches are a Mystery to me, Sister." He grinned at her. "I have one right now. Mark Andrew would say they were from thinking too much."

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Simon stood up as soon as she was gone. He had forgotten the papers the Grand Master had sent for Lucio and Mark Andrew to read over. He had to get his mind back on track. They were still in the trunk of his car. He jogged around to the front of the house and ran into John Paul in the driveway staring out across the meadow toward the mound of rocks.

"Brother." Simon stopped to look at him and John Paul turned around slowly. There was blood all over his face. "John Paul! Saints preserve us! What happened?" Simon took the Knight's arm. "What on earth happened to you?" he asked again.

John Paul simply looked at him and then down at his arm. Simon pulled up the sleeve of his shirt and saw a terrible gash in his wrist. A huge puddle of blood lay about his feet and a string of bright red drops led away from the white rocks of the drive into the grass and away toward the mound.

"Come inside!" Simon pulled on him and he followed without saying anything. He was wobbly and weak on his feet from the loss of blood. And he was completely disoriented. It seemed he had been standing in the drive for quite some time just bleeding.

Simon did not want to upset the household. His thoughts of Michele and of what John Paul had told him still weighed heavily on him. He was sure that John Paul had been thinking the same things he had and that this, like the incident at the pool in Italy, had been an attempt at suicide. This would never do. Something had to be done for him and soon. They met no one in the hall and Simon took him to his own bedroom after a quick stop in the bathroom under the stairs to wash off the greater part of the blood.

The wound was jagged and ugly. He must have made it with one of the rocks at the mound. Gruesome, but effective. The vein was cut. Simon wrapped a towel around it and ushered John Paul down the hall quickly. It had to hurt, but the Knight of the Orient's face was bland and pale as if he felt nothing. His arm was cold and perspiration stood out on his face. Simon made him sit on the bed and admonished him not to move. The Healer ran back to the bathroom grabbed up a bundle of towels and then

went to clean the blood from the floor and the front steps. The puddle in the drive was too large to clean. He parked his car over it and hoped no one would notice any time soon. He rushed back inside.

John Paul was sitting as he had left him with the same blank expression on his face.

"John?" Simon knelt in front of him. "Look at me, Brother! How did this happen?"

"I don't remember," John Paul muttered and blinked at him. "I'm cold, Brother."

Simon unwrapped his arm and cringed at the sight of the wound. There would be no hiding this. He wrapped the arm in the bloody towel and made the priest lay back on the bed. Simon placed one hand on the offended arm. Cold as ice. He crossed his arms over his chest and bowed his forehead to the floor.

"O, Lord Almighty, God of Gods and men, Creator of all the Heavens and of earth and all things here below and all things above, hear the humble prayer of Thy servant, Simon of Grenoble, Chevalier du Serpent, Mystic Healer, Poor Knight of Solomon's Temple. Lend Thy aid to his cause and look down upon the suffering of Thy children." Simon raised his head from the floor and then bowed again three times before continuing his prayer. He turned to face John Paul and placed one hand over his heart. He could not even feel the heart beat. John let out a long, ragged sigh and was gone. Bled out. Michele would have a cow! "O, Lord of Heaven and of earth, hear my plea. Let the infirmities of my Brother, John Paul Sinclair-Ramsay, pass unto me."

There was an intense burning sensation in his right wrist and then he felt cold and numb all over. This injury was not as severe as the one that Mark Andrew had suffered in the cavern and he managed to remain lucid this time. He pulled himself up wearily and sat on the side of the bed. John Paul stared up at the ceiling, unseeing, unblinking for the requisite twelve minutes while Simon tried to recover. His eyes drooped and he fell asleep in the chair. John's voice, a low whisper, woke him a few short minutes later.

"And in those days shall men seek death, and shall not find it; and shall desire to die, and death shall flee from them. Draw thy sword, and thrust me through therewith. I pray thee it is enough; now, O Lord, take

away my life; for I am not better than my fathers." He closed his eyes and Simon sat looking at him in shock.

"John Paul! Suicide is the gravest of sins! Would you take the life that God has given you?" Simon asked him.

John Paul opened his eyes and turned a baleful look on him before he began to repeat the verses of Job. The very same Job that he and his father had spoken of only two days before. At that moment John looked more like his father than ever Simon had believed possible.

"Why died I not from the womb? Why did I not give up the Ghost when I came out of the belly? Oh that I might have my request; and that God would grant me the thing that I long for! Even that it would please God to destroy me; that he would let loose his hand, and cut me off! What is my strength that I should hope? And what is mine end, that I should prolong my life? Is my strength the strength of stones? Or is my flesh of brass? Is not my help in me? And is wisdom driven quite from me?"

Simon stood up shakily and brushed back his hair from his face. He would have to tell someone.

"Stay here, Brother," Simon said wearily and then hurried away to look for Mark Andrew.

He saw Lucio taking his lesson from Merry on the patio. Mark Andrew was still in the laboratory. He could hear the sound of the hammer.

Simon rushed down the stairs, stumbling on the last one and then flinging himself across the floor to the lab. He rushed into the room to look about wild-eyed. Mark Andrew stopped what he was doing and looked up at him in bewilderment. There was blood on his hands and streaked across his face. Paddy Puffingtowne slid off the high stool to stare at him mouth agape.

"Whattaver is th' tribble?" Paddy asked and Mark Andrew came at once to take the priest by the shoulders.

"Wot happened?!" he asked.

"John Paul!" Simon managed to say and they were out the door with Simon leading the way.

John Paul still lay on the bed with the bloody towel wrapped around his arm.

"What happened?" Mark Andrew turned to Simon again and asked in a lower, more controlled voice.

Paddy perused the bloody towel and the prophet's pale cheeks.

“He tried to kill himself… again, Brother,” Simon told him. “He did a really good job this time. He actually succeeded.”

“Why?!” Mark leaned over the bed and placed one dirty hand on the priest’s face. “Why’d ye do it, John?”

He closed his eyes. He did not want to talk to his father about it.

“He’s upset because Michele is talking about leaving,” Simon blurted the truth. “I don’t think he wants her to go.” Simon flinched at the absurdity of his own statement. It was not what he was thinking, but he couldn’t say that. “I mean…”

“I know what you mean, Brother,” Mark Andrew muttered and turned to look at him. “Give me a minute with him.”

Simon looked up at the ceiling and chewed his lip thoughtfully before leading Paddy from the room. They stood in the hallway, facing each other in the semi-gloom.

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Mark sat on the side of the bed and brushed his hands on his pants.

“John Paul,” he said after a moment. “You can’t commit suicide. I know. I’ve tried it. It doesn’t work. It’s not in God’s plan for you.”

John Paul said nothing.

“We don’t know what will happen if Michele leaves,” Mark Andrew continued. “I think there must be some answer we’re not seeing. I don’t think God would be so cruel to us. Lucio owns a vineyard in Tuscany. There’s a nice house there and plenty of land. The people are friendly, but not nosy. You could…”

“I will speak in the anguish of my spirit; I will complain in the bitterness of my soul. When I say, My bed shall comfort me, my couch shall ease my complaint; Then thou scarest me with dreams, and terrifiest me through visions: So that my soul chooseth strangling, and death rather than my life. I loathe it; I would not live always: let me alone; for my days are vanity.”

Mark Andrew recognized these scriptures as from the old testament book of Job.

"My son. Have you no thought for the rest of us? We suffer many things and we suffer together or alone, but we suffer. We are not here to question the will of God. You of all people should know this. And what you did for Sir Philip was something no man should ever have to do for another. It is a great burden and I am sympathetic with you as no one else can be. Your presence is a great comfort to me in that respect alone. Why would you want to bring more suffering to us by taking yourself away from us? I have never been a father to you, but you are my son never the less and I would lay down my life for you now and forever. I would ask that you at least have some thought for your mother. This will devastate her. She knows nothing of what you did in Italy and as I understand it, you knew nothing of your attempted suicide in the pool there, or did you? And what of Michele? Do you expect her to follow you?"

"No," John Paul told him. "I overheard what was said in Council. I am grateful for what you said on my behalf, Papa. I never knew you cared for me at all."

Now he sounded like Lucio! Mark kicked himself mentally. Was he such a terrible person that everyone thought him so cold and heartless? "You cannot help Michele by killing yourself," Mark Andrew told him. "I'm going down to the lab and I'm going to make something for you that will help you feel better and will help you to sleep without dreams."

Mark stood up and John Paul grabbed his arm.

"Papa!" he said and raised himself from the bed slightly. "I committed the same crime against Michele as you did with Mother. The one she has denied for so long. How can I live with that knowledge? How do you live with it?"

Mark Andrew looked down at his son in disbelief. How could this be? Why would John Paul do such a thing? Were the sins of the father truly delivered unto the sons?

"I can't answer that for you," Mark Andrew told him. "But you see that I still live and I do smile from time to time and I have hope. Your mother is a special woman, John. Don't ever forget that. She's stronger than she looks and she loves me." Mark shrugged. What more could he say? If Meredith did not love him, she wouldn't put up with him for a moment. "You'll get over it. If she loves you, she will, too."

"But how?" John Paul fell back on the pillow and closed his eyes.

Mark Andrew stood still for a moment and then shook off the terrible sinking feeling in his stomach. How, indeed?

He hurried to the door to find Simon and Paddy still waiting for him.

"Merry is calling for you, Brother," Simon told him. "It's time for your lesson."

"Stay with him, Simon." Mark Andrew swallowed hard and then glanced back in the room. "Keep him here. I'll think of something. Talk to him. Paddy, help keep him awake. I'll be back."

"I'll stay with 'ee," Paddy nodded. "Go on, get yer lessons, Andy. Don't worry yer 'ead aboot a thing 'ere."

Simon was actually glad for Paddy's company. He did not relish the thought of staying with John Paul when he was in such a state. Simon had no experience with this type of thing and if he allowed something to happen to John Paul, Merry would never forgive him. He followed Paddy into the room as Mark Andrew hurried away muttering something rude about King Solomon's wisdom under his breath.

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Lucia Simone sat up in her bed and screamed. She held onto her wrist and looked about in horror as Flo came hurrying into the room to sit on the side of the little bed, holding her and rocking her back and forth.

"Floyd!" Flo shouted for her brother. "Them folks is scaring this poor child to death! Tell them to go home. Tell them that they can see her on Saturday. Run them off, now, Floyd! Take your shotgun if you have to."

Floyd sighed and headed for the front porch. He hated to mess with the people who had come to see the girl. They were a pitiful lot with their diseases and their afflictions, but the news of what Lucy had done for Miss Lady had spread through the backwoods like wildfire in August. He shook his head and picked up the heavy, double-barreled twelve gauge from behind the door before stepping outside.

"All right, people!" he shouted at the crowd standing in the front of his house. They milled about or sat around on rickety stools or overturned buckets. The chickens straggled in and out among them and the hogs rooted about in the mud looking for free handouts. "Ya'll need to go on home now. Miss Florence say that you will see the girl on Saturday and not

before. Ya'll scarin' her to death out here like this. She just a little girl. Go on home now. Don't make me mad! You heah?"

The folks gathered in his yard muttered and complained, but began to get up slowly, packing up their lunch boxes and ice chests. The sight of the shotgun in Floyd's hands put the fear into them. He was known far and wide for a slow burning temper that, once ignited, was likely to explode. They didn't want to test him.

Floyd watched until the last of them had trailed off down the muddy road. He walked down the steps and out to the hog-wire fence and opened the gate and looked off toward the backwater. The great golden bird sat upon the highest branch of the dead cypress tree across the slough. Floyd raised the shotgun, pulled one hammer back, aimed at the bird and fired one barrel. The thunder of the blast echoed several times across the water, sending numerous cranes and smaller birds to flight for safety. Lucy screamed from within the house and Floyd cringed. Flo would be mad. The dogs in the yard howled and the hogs squealed and ran under the house in panic. The black and white chickens scattered about in the road and on the porch flitted into the air and squawked in fright, but the eagle did not fly from its perch in the top of the tree.

Floyd didn't like the sight of the big bird. It would be preying on his chickens before long and he had enough trouble with varmints taking his stock. He didn't need another interloper feeding off his chickens. That eagle didn't belong here. He'd never seen one in these parts. When he turned back to toward the house, he had to duck as a big, black crow swooped in on his head, cawing loudly. He flung his arm up and the other barrel of the gun discharged, this round struck the steps and knocked a big hole in one of the old gray boards. The crow fluttered away and he walked across the yard, cursing himself for his bad luck. He would have to replace the step or Flo would really be mad. When he leaned to look at the damage, he jumped back at the sight of a good-sized snake, a water moccasin, lying under the steps.

"Holy Mary!" he shouted and ran for the hoe. When he got back with the hoe, the snake was gone. He put one hand over his runaway heart and shook his head. Three frights in row! Not a good omen at all. Three frights in row! He would have to make a sacrifice for sure on Saturday. He felt he needed protection. He found his sister in the kitchen putting on a pot of coffee. She turned a dark look on him when he came in sheepishly.

He began to protest loudly before she could start fussing at him for shooting the gun as he told about the eagle and the crow and the snake and how scared he was. She hated the gun.

"I don't like this one bit, Flo," he told her as he sat down heavily on the wooden bench at the table. "I don't know what we gonna do. They gonna expect some miracles or something and I don't know what we gonna do. What we gonna do about that bird?"

"I'll tell you what we're gonna do, brother." Flo turned to look at him. "We gonna see what the child is about and if she have the gift, then we gonna use it. If God sent her to us, then he meant us to use her. She might not be here long. But we gonna see after her and we gonna find out what she's about. As for the eagle and the crow and the serpent. I'll have to check on that. It sounds real familiar. But don't worry your head, brother. Jasmine will be here Saturday and she knows bout these things."

Floyd shook his head sadly. He didn't like it one bit. He was beginning to regret having brought the girl here in the first place. His eyes fell on his boots by the back door as some small movement caught his attention. Cautiously, he got up and kicked at the rubber boot. To his horror, a black scorpion the size of his hand crawled out of the boot and scooted under the screen door. Floyd followed it outside, ready to stomp it to death, but when he got outside, the thing had slipped through the cracks in the porch.

Floyd shuddered and stuffed his hands in his pockets. It was frightening to think that such evil creatures lived under their house.

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Paddy wandered about Simon's room poking into all the corners and looking in all his belongings like a small child in a candy store. Simon watched him in fascination from the chair by the bed. John Paul lay staring up at the ceiling in abject depression, but he was regaining his color and his strength rapidly.

"You know I brought something for your father and Brother Lucio from the Grand Master," Simon told him. "I was just about to get it from

my car when I found you out there."

No response.

"It has something to do with the Arcanum," Simon continued. It was very hard to think of things to say now. He was running out of small talk. He wished desperately that Mark Andrew would come back. "I thought you might like to see it."

No response.

"It was what Sir Philip was studying just before he… just before he came to Scotland." Simon leaned forward and placed his elbows on his knees. He needed to wash up. He still had John Paul's blood on his hands. "I should think that since you're now the Knight of the Orient, you would be the best person to look it over."

No response.

"It's called the War of the Knights. Funny, oui?" Simon raised both eyebrows and Paddy turned to look at him from where he was examining the silver sword with the entwined serpents on the hilt. "Would you like me to bring it to you?"

"No," John Paul told him shortly. "I have already seen it."

"Oh," Simon nodded. "Then it is of no use? I can save them the trouble and just report to the Master that it is unimportant."

"No," John Paul said only the one word. Simon had asked too many questions. He didn't know which one the priest was answering.

"No, don't report it? Or no, it is of some use or no, it's not of some use?" Simon sat up and frowned at John Paul, perplexed. Patience was patience. His was running out. He would never understand how Meredith and Michele could put up with the prophet's silence.

John Paul raised his head and looked at Simon frowning. He had managed to confuse both of them.

"Sorry," Simon shrugged. "I suppose I'm just tired."

"Brother Lucio is the man in Iron Armor," John Paul told him. "My father is Mercury and you are Gold."

"Really?" Simon perked up. At least he had gotten a response from the priophet. That was an improvement.

"There is trouble yet to come for you," John Paul said slowly. "Somewhere there is another gallows for Brother Lucio and he has already been hung once. He will hang again. And he will sink in the red earth

unless he is redeemed by the copper woman. The copper woman will give him the drink and he will refuse or he will accept. It will be his choice."

"Thou, Gold, shalt henceforth not vex nor despise Iron, but I order thee to make good use of its noble, beautiful red flowers which Iron has got in his garden for the sake of multiplying thy active power. Thou shalt unite with Iron in friendship," Paddy quoted from the War of the Knights as he perused Simon's dagger. "Thot is wot Mercury says to th' Gold. Thot's wot Andy wud say to ye, Pierre. Th' red flowers in th' garden wair planted thair by Lucky. They air 'is flowers. 'e 'as been in misery, Pierre, but now 'e 'as made peace with 'imself. And you and th' Golden Eagle air Brothers again. 'e meant no 'arm in wot 'e said t' ye. 'e loves ye still and th' flowers 'e planted wair red loike th' blood o' 'is 'eart thot 'e bled fur losin' 'is lady. Ye wair just at th' wrong place at th' roight toime. But thot dusna mean ye shud be careless aboot yer feelin's fer th' lassie. Thair cud be an 'angman's noose waitin' fer ye as well. Take a care, laddie, and leave well enough alone. Merry b'longs to Andy now and thot's 'ow it shud be."

Simon stared at the clurichaun. Did everyone know what was in the parchment but him? And why was Paddy warning him about Merry? He had already made up his mind about her. He knew it was a hopeless love he felt for her. He was about to protest when Paddy cut him off.

"Won't ye go on out to yer contraption and fetch th' papers, Pierre? I'll keep the laddie comp'ny til ye get back." Paddy put the dagger down on the dresser and climbed up on the bed to sit cross-legged at the foot near John Paul's feet.

"I don't know…" Simon licked his lips. He really needed to wash up.

"Go on, now, lad." Paddy waved one hand. "Johnny will be just foine."

"All right, but don't move out of the bed, John Paul." Simon got up and found himself a clean shirt before leaving.

As soon as the door was closed, Paddy scooted up in the bed beside John Paul and took hold of his uninjured left arm.

"Now, Johnny, me boy," he said, leaning close to him. "I want ye shud look into me eyes and see wot I have in moind fer yer lassie. I know thot ye can do it loike Konnie can and I think thot ye'll loike wot ye see. But dunna go takin' advantage o' me secrets. I'm puttin' a great trust in ye t' let ye go rustlin' aboot in me attic."

John Paul frowned and then smiled as the clurichaun's words sank in. He turned his head to look at the clurichaun. They locked eyes and within minutes John Paul was fast asleep. Paddy unwrapped the wounded arm and grimaced at the sight of the ugly rip in his skin. He took a small vial and one of Marco's plastic baby spoons from his vest pocket. He poured a bit of red liquid on the cut and then spread it around gingerly on the wound before wrapping it again with the towel. He placed one hand on John Paul's forehead and closed his eyes.

When Simon returned momentarily, he found John Paul sitting up in the bed, propped against the pillows with a smile on his face. Paddy was walking back and forth on the mattress singing a particularly bawdy Irish barroom song about a girl with big feet and a long nose and red petticoat. He leaped from the bed when Simon came in and landed on his feet in front of the Healer.

"Johnny's feelin' much bettar now, aren't ye, Johnny, me boy?" Paddy laughed and bounded out the door. Simon heard the little man singing as he made his way down the hall.

Simon raised both eyebrows at John Paul and the prophet shrugged.

"Forgive me, Brother," John Paul said sheepishly. "I have sinned. Would you hear my confession?"

"Of course."

Simon laid the papers on his dresser and went to sit beside the prophet. He was greatly relieved, but he was totally puzzled at the remarkable change in the prophet's demeanor. He was suspicious that the clurichaun might have given him some faery drug. He crossed himself, none-the-less and looked at John Paul expectantly.

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out of his mouth cometh knowledge and understanding.

Mark Andrew returned to Simon's room as quickly as he could. He had managed to get through the lesson with Merry without giving anything away concerning John Paul and then had gotten down to the lab to throw together something for the priest to help him sleep. He stopped in the kitchen to search for a medium to make the concoction palatable and almost laughed when he found a bottle of strawberry-kiwi fruit juice in the refrigerator. He grabbed a glass from the drainboard and took the fruit juice down the hall to Simon's room.

John Paul was sitting in a chair beside the bed while Simon reclined on the bed, resting his head on one hand and talking to the prophet in an animated fashion. Mark Andrew stopped at the door and looked at them in surprise. Simon was relating the tale of the battle with the Dybbukym in the meadows of the underworld and John Paul was listening to his story with great interest. One thing Simon had in common with Louis Champlain was that he could tell a good story when the opportunity presented itself.

"Papa," John Paul greeted him as he usually did and smiled when he stopped in the door.

"John Paul," Mark nodded to him, but frowned. His son never failed to shock him. How could he look so much like Luke Matthew and not actually be Luke Matthew? How long would it take for him to truly recognize this man as his own son? It was impossible. The prophet had made a remarkable recovery. Mark Andrew took the stuff he had brought to the dresser, poured the two liquids together in the glass and swirled them around. "I hope you like strawberry-kiwi. I don't particularly care for it." He handed the glass to his son and stood back. "That will help you to sleep… without dreams."

John Paul took the glass and then looked toward the door. He needed to get out of Simon's bedroom, take a shower and get rid of the blood. Michele would have a fit if she found out what he had done. He pulled the bloody towel from his arm and looked at the wound. It was nothing more than a pink and purple line now. Paddy's potion had done the trick.

"Thank you, Papa," he said shortly and got up. He felt much better now.

Simon pushed himself up off the bed and took a look at the arm.

"That's much better. Remarkable, in fact," Simon muttered and a slight frown etched his forehead. "Won't you go on and get cleaned up before you drink that. You need to sleep. You lost a great deal of blood, Brother. You need to rest."

John Paul nodded and left the two Knights alone.

When he had gone, Simon lay back on the bed and Mark Andrew sat down in the chair. He was still gritty from working on the sword. He had coal dust on his hands and his arms up to his rolled cuffs and a smear on his left cheek. His sore finger throbbed and he looked at Simon forlornly.

"How did your lesson go?" the priest asked him.

"It went quite well… I think." Mark Andrew shrugged. "I hardly remember. My mind was on other things. He seems to be all right now."

"Yes," Simon agreed. "I believe your little Paddy did something to him. I don't know what he did, but it worked. I went out to get some papers the Grand Master sent for you and Brother Lucio to look at. There on the dresser. And when I came back, Paddy was singing to him and he was as you saw him. He is… was distressed about Michele."

"I know," Mark said quietly. "I'm fairly distressed about that meself."

"We'll just have to wait and see, Brother," Simon told him. "I've given it some thought and I have no answer. It is beyond me. The answer will have to come from a higher power. The Grand Master will have to decide or God will simply have to intervene."

"Perhaps He already has," Mark Andrew said thoughtfully and scratched his ear. He clicked his thumbnail against his teeth. "Has John Paul told you anything about these dreams he's been having?"

"He has." Simon closed his eyes. "I tried to tell him that they were only nightmares, but they are your dreams Mark Andrew. I've heard you confess the same stories to me. Why would he be having your dreams or more precisely, your memories in his dreams?"

"I don't know. It sounds like sorcery and witchcraft to me," Mark Andrew said quietly. "Perhaps someone is trying to hurt him. Dammit, Simon! I dunna loike me loife's story laid out fer someone else's eyes. Tisn't roight. It's bad enough thot you 'ave t' 'ear it, but me own son…

And fer thot mattar, I canna think o' him as me son, Simon. Tisn't roight." Mark stopped and cleared his throat. "I'm sorry."

"I can't explain it, Brother. But perhaps we both know who might be able to torment him so, but why? I thought he had it in for you, not John Paul." Simon raised his head and looked the Knight of Death.

"Perhaps he has me confused with John Paul," Mark Andrew offered one explanation. Al Hafiz would be the prime candidate. He was the only one they knew who possessed such powers. "Perhaps we can find a way to combat this evil."

"Perhaps." Simon laid his head back again. "John Paul has the means to do it himself. He possesses basically the same knowledge as the Mad Arab."

"Merry possesses the knowledge to do most anything she likes," Mark Andrew said quietly. "I have seen things from her mind. I believe that this little experiment, as she calls it, is not so little. I had never given her Mystery much thought. It seems very involved. I've never had the occasion to carry it for too long."

"She cannot use her Mystery freely," Simon reminded him. "We may speak to her about it, but it would not do for us to suggest that she try to use it for personal reasons."

"It would not be personal for the same basic reason that this exercise is not personal. The future of the Order is at stake, Brother. If we allow someone like the black sorcerer to interfere and torment our Brothers to the point of suicide, then the Order is at stake. If he can do this at will, then it would only be a matter of time before he has everyone of us," Mark told him. "The Order is at risk until he is eliminated."

"You have a point," Simon agreed. "He is the one responsible for what happened to Sister Meredith and myself. He has already shown what powers he can assert over us. I believe he was responsible for your hair turning red, for instance. There is no other explanation and now it is no longer red because the spell was broken when we came out of the pit and killed the serpent. We did great injury to him. And you blinded him. You took his eye, Brother. And I believe that he would like to avenge himself on you. If he cannot reach you, then what better way to torment you than attack your son? Furthermore, if he is enamored of Sister Meredith, then he wants you out of the way. Not only you, but the son you had with her and probably Brother Dambretti as well and their children. It is no wonder that

he would want to attack us personally. He has his superior, as well as his inferior, goals now. He will have to be killed. It should be no problem. We simply have to locate him, study him, look for his weaknesses and strike at the opportune moment. Your specialty, I believe. I might even enjoy going on the mission with you, if you can swing it."

Mark Andrew sat looking at Simon. It was strange to hear the change in him. Still the same French slurring of the English and still the same quiet wisdom, but not the same. He had never heard the priest suggest that someone be killed with such cold certainty.

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Al Hafiz al Sajek, Assassin and Sorcerer, raised his arms toward the face of the moon and began to sing in a high voice that echoed across the courtyard of his home in the Punjab and sent chills up and down the spines of his sentries. Some of them covered their ears with their hands and made magick signs in the air in front of them for protection. Their master had been in a foul mood all day and had even killed one of the house servants in a fit of rage. Now he was on the roof making incantations to the moon and they were all terrified. They had never seen their master in such a state. Normally, he was a benevolent master with a generous purse, but they all knew that loyalty akin to slavery was required of all who would follow him. He treated his people well, rewarded them heavily when they did good, but if they failed him or tried to leave… that was a different story. In their hearts, they feared him.

The magician lowered his arms and then unwrapped the silver amulet from its black silken cloth. He laid it on the solid block of black glassy stone in front of him and the moonlight shimmered on the symbols carved in the metal. A bluish glow emanated from the silver disk as he sank to the surface of the roof in a cross-legged position with his palms resting on his knees. He closed his eye and inhaled deeply the odor of the camphor oil he had sprinkled about the altar.

"O An, father of the gods, you who possess the secret of the ebbs and flows of life, look down upon this stone and see your seal." Al Hafiz picked up a swath of blue silk from beside him and uncovered a rolled up

piece of parchment paper and a vial of mercury. He laid the vial on top of the parchment, which was covered with symbols drawn in silver. He turned his gaze to the west where the sun had just sank below the treetops and the bright light of the planet Mercury held momentarily above the horizon. "O Chequetet, guardian of the gods and keeper of the secret knowledge of the sciences, hear me and look down upon your seal." He returned his attention to the altar and the north. "I beseech thee, O great and ancient wonders, most powerful gods of secrets and of knowledge. Grant to me, your humble servant, al Hafiz al Sajek, that which he desires. Reveal to me the one who would torment me, your humble servant, with unbidden images. Show me the face of this wizard that I may deal justly with him."

Al Hafiz brought both hands up in front of his face and closed his eye to await the vision.

He saw an iron vessel filled with hot water and the sweet smell of spices tickled his nose. Wisps of steam rose into the air above the bath and then he saw the form of a woman stepping into the water. Her legs were long and slender and her form was lovely and enticing as she sank into the tub. Al Hafiz drew in a sharp breath and opened his eye.

The vision was gone! Sermiramis! The Queen of Babylon! His lost love! Oh, how this pained him! She was sending these images to him? It was not possible. He frowned and concentrated his attention again and closed his eye. She stood now in the tub fully naked before him, dipping a copper ladle in the water and pouring it over her body. She chanted a prayer as she bathed herself in the water. This was a ritual bath. She was conjuring. What was she conjuring? Why was she sending images to him?

He almost laughed when the answer came as swiftly as a bolt of lightning. She was not sending, he was merely receiving and doing so because he had made it so. This was a great relief. But she had been looking into the minds of her Brothers. This bothered him. And she was preparing herself for some great rite. It was very frustrating to know that he would be unable to witness the rite. Once she drew the circle and made the proper invocations, he would be prevented from seeing. The magick she possessed was very great. He longed to hold her and control this magick. It would be a great help to him when it was accomplished. He would possess two of the greatest Mysteries in the world. The wisdom of the Ancient Ones and the Wisdom of Solomon. Nothing, nor no one could stop him once this was done.

Before he closed his ritual, he unwrapped the golden cup from a bundle of white silk and set it on the roof in front of him. He re-focused his attention to the prophet. Something had changed here. The prophet was no longer in turmoil though his mind was troubled and he had recently suffered some grave injury. The prophet was in his secret place making the conjurations to Nodens! What a surprise. Was the man expecting to see him again? Surely he was and should be. Al Hafiz concentrated his attentions on the prophet and sent him another dream to be manifested the very next time he closed his eyes.

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John Paul had neglected his work and it pained him to think that he had been so foolish. He climbed the stairs in the bell tower wearily and then sat down on the floor of the upper most station beside the old bell. After breathing deeply for several moments to collect himself, he took his amulet from his pocket and prepared to make the conjurations. He raised his arms and looked up at the full moon visible even before the sun had set. The silver amulet lay on the black silk cloth in front of him, reflecting the light of the moon, but shielded from the sun's rays by the shade of the tree near the bell tower. If the sun's rays touched the amulet it would disintegrate. He repeated the invocation and asked for strength in his purpose. He wanted to know who was troubling his sleep though he already knew. But he had to start over. Once the ancient ones had given him the answer, he would ask for knowledge of banishment and protection. This would involve another rite tomorrow night.

He scooted back from the altar and looked out the side window of the bell tower onto the tops of the oak trees. The view from the tower was beautiful and the atmosphere surrounding him was peaceful and rejuvenating. He had always loved it here. This had been his place ever since he had first come to Scotland to visit his father ages ago. He leaned his chin on his arm on the windowsill and was soon sleeping.

There were people everywhere in the streets, running and shrieking. The wall was in ruins. Saladin's warriors were coming through the breach. He had to reach the girl before it was too late. Again he found himself

running in the streets toward the house of the shariffe, the man who had taken the girl from her father. Now would be the best time to take her. The shariffe, a very powerful man, would no doubt blame her disappearance on the chaotic condition of the town. He would think her dead or carried away by the Saracens. He ran up the steps of the house and into the courtyard. Again, he found no one. No guards, no servants. Nothing. The sounds of a woman crying came from one of the rooms, which opened onto the courtyard. Again, he had the girl in hand and again, the man in the blue turban confronted him much like a disturbingly realistic video game from his youth. This time, however, it was different. The man cut his throat and he felt the same searing pain as he fell and was then kicked into the pool. Then suddenly he was entering the courtyard again, seeing his own body floating in the pool. He thrashed into the water with his sword drawn and pulled himself out, crying and shouting to God for help, but it was too late. He already dead.

The woman was crying. She was the murderess who had killed him. He caught her up and threw her down on the tiles. Her crying enraged him and he fell on her, ripping away her clothes, covering her mouth with his hand as he raped her and then brutally killed her, slashing her throat with his dagger.

His eyes flew open and she was gone. The blood was gone. The courtyard was gone. The sun was shining brightly in his face. He grabbed his amulet just in time to save it from the brilliant rays peaking over the windowsill.

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Mark Andrew held up the blade of the sword and perused it carefully in the light of the oil lamp. It had been quick work, too quick, but Lucio was right. It was only a trifle. Just a practice sword, though an elegant one, for a small boy. It would be dangerous enough though he would not want to trust it in a real battle. He laid the blade on the side of the oven and went to sit on the stool at the workbench. He was tired and he had a headache from pounding on the blade. Tomorrow, he would polish it and begin the engraving along the shaft. Then there would be more polishing before it

would be ready for the hilt Lucio had been working on. The one thing that Mark had been pleased with in Lucio was his skill in smithing, leather and metalworking. It was one of the few things that the Italian had mastered as his apprentice besides the ability to hold an inordinate amount of alcohol in his system at any given time. Alchemy had disinterested him and he had no desire to be the Order's assassin. Lucio would also be designing and making a scabbard for the little sword, but Mark had little interest in leatherwork. He couldn't pound on the leather like he could pound on metal. Less fulfilling.

Paddy had promised to provide the stones for the settings. He picked up the flask he had prepared earlier and drank down the yellowish contents, making a terrible face. It was yellow, but it was very, very pale yellow, almost white. The headache began to fade almost instantly. He watched as a spider crawled from under the shelf, up one of his tripods and began to make a web between the upright bracket and the shelf. He leaned his chin on his arm and watched the spider as it spun its miraculous web. As he watched, his eyelids grew heavy and he drifted off to sleep.

He was running in the streets of Jerusalem. He had to find Luke Matthew! Why had his brother gone off in the midst of all this chaos? They had been ordered back to the sanctuary. It was hopeless. People ran through the streets carrying their belongings in bundles on their heads or leading braying donkeys and camels through the mad crowds. He caught a glimpse of Luke's mantel ahead of him and pushed several people out of his way in an attempt to catch up with him. Where was he going?! What was he doing?!

His brother turned down a narrow alley and then emerged into a less crowded street. Mark Andrew stopped and stared up at the façade of the home in front of him. The shariffe! The mad man. Surely, Luke Matthew had not gone in there! But there was no other place he could have disappeared to so quickly. Mark Andrew drew a deep breath and stepped back in the shadows of the alley, undecided on what to do next. He was accosted by a group of starving children and sent them away with a threatening look and a swing of his broadsword. He had no time for alms-giving now. He stepped into the light again and made his way slowly across the street to the steps of the impressive residence. The guards that usually patrolled the steps in front of the house were nowhere to be seen. Perhaps they had all deserted their master. He was about to mount the steps

when he was accosted by yet another pauper child. He turned to shove the boy away and saw the face of the ragged boy from Italy. The one who had saved him from the well. The one with the terrible wound on his face now only barely beginning to heal.

"What are you doing here, boy?!" Mark Andrew asked him in a low, angry voice. They had only just come from the tombs. The boy should have been in the sanctuary with the others.

"I am your servant, sir!" The boy, Lucius, smiled at him. That had to hurt.

Mark Andrew drew another deep breath. There was nothing to be done about it now. He would beat the boy soundly for disobeying him later.

They entered the house and listened for sounds of the inhabitants. They heard nothing but the noise of water running in the fountain in the courtyard. The place seemed deserted. He traversed several rooms with overturned furnishings and then paused before stepping into the bright sunlight of the open pavilion, momentarily blinded by the brilliant reflections from the surface of the pool in the center of the tiled enclosure. A man in a blue turban held his brother's head up by his hair as he knelt before him. The man turned to smile wickedly at him before drawing the blade of his dagger across Luke Matthew's throat. A woman screamed, the boy screamed and he heard himself scream. The large jewels on the handle of the dagger in the man's hand flashed in the sunlight.

Mark Andrew jerked his head up from the table and fell off the stool to the floor. He came up again and spun around looking for the man in the blue turban. The black magician! Al Hafiz , the Assassin! Al Hafiz had killed his brother! Not the woman! Not the woman! But this was not what he remembered or how he remembered it. This was only a dream. He ran from the laboratory through the wine cellar and up the stairs to the hallway and then down the hall to the library. Lucio was sitting on the sofa, half asleep.

"Brother!" he shouted in the startled Knight's face and then took him by the arm to drag him out of the library to the front stoop and down the steps into the driveway.

"Santa Maria! Che cosa e` esso?" Lucio pulled away from his panicked grasp and Mark Andrew fell on his knees in the rocks.

"Brother!" Mark Andrew could not find the words or the breath to calm his racing heart.

Lucio reached to take his arm and lifted him to his feet.

"What has happened now, Mark?!" Lucio leaned into his face.

"The dream. The woman." Mark Andrew was in shock.

"What dream? What woman?" Lucio shook him. "Get hold of yourself! Tell me what is wrong!"

Mark Andrew drew a deep breath and then closed his eyes. "I would ask you a question, Brother."

"All this for a question? Santa Maria!" Lucio let go of him. "What?"

"The woman at the shariffe's palace in Jerusalem… who was she?"

Lucio looked at him in surprise.

"The woman? The one you… killed?" The Italian was taken aback. Mark Andrew was going way back in time now.

"Yes! The one in the courtyard. The one who was there when Luke Matthew died! Who was she? I have to know." Mark Andrew sounded desperate.

"She was the daughter of one of the Bishop's allies I think. I was only a young boy and a servant then. I was not privy to such information. I heard tales that she was being held for ransom. I don't know. Why? Why do you ask after so long, Brother?" Lucio asked, afraid to hear the answer, not wanting to remember what had happened that fateful day.

"She did not kill my brother," Mark said miserably and sank to one knee again.

"No," Lucio shook his head. "No. She didn't. She was just there. I believe that your brother went there to try to free her before the Saracens took the city completely, but that would only be a guess. There were many such hostages in those days. The infidels were always engaging in such intrigues. Kidnapping each other's sons and daughters for real or imagined slights. Holding them for ransoms and such. It was common enough."

"I thought she killed him," Mark Andrew said through clenched teeth. He was in terrible pain now. He clutched his stomach and began to cough. "I thought… I knew…"

"You were never very good at thinking, Brother," Lucio grumped as he helped him to his feet.

"Why didn't you tell me?!" Mark Andrew asked as he choked and coughed and stumbled alongside him. He jerked away from Lucio and spun to face him.

"You never asked. I was nothing more than a street urchin. Besides, you told me not to say anything… remember?" Lucio told him quietly as he leaned toward him, offering his arm again as he might have done when he had been just a boy and considered Mark to be an old man.

Mark Andrew allowed the Italian to take him to the library where he sat on the sofa with his face in his hands.

"That was a long time ago. Why are you concerned with it now, Brother?"

Mark Andrew just shook his head. He couldn't believe it. He finally looked up at Lucio.

"You've never seen the black sorcerer, al Hafiz al Sajek, have you?" he asked.

"Not in person. No. Why do you ask?"

"You have seen a picture of him?" Mark Andrew frowned.

"No," Lucio answered. "I saw him when Merry took my hand."

"What?!" Mark Andrew's face drained completely of its remaining color. "How so?"

"Yes. I saw him. He was pitching woo at our woman, Brother," Lucio told him and then told what he had promised not to tell. "He is madly in love with her. Didn't you know?"

"No! No! and No!" Mark Andrew stood up. This was the second time he had heard this. Semiramis, the wife of Marduk, also known as al Hafiz .

"Yes! It's true. I saw it! That's why he took her from the chapel," Lucio insisted and stood up as well. "It seems that our little friend Sam was right. Our good buddy, al Hafiz , visited Merry when she and Simon were in the Abyss together. But…"

"But what?!" Mark was beside himself.

"But she doesn't know it. She doesn't remember it," Lucio told him and caught his arm as he started from the room. "Don't do anything rash, Brother. It's not her fault."

Marco Niccolo chose that particular moment to burst into the library.

"Papa!" He looked up at Lucio. "Is my sword ready yet?"

"No, not quite. We still have to put the hilt on it."

"When will it be ready?" Marco was disappointed.

Lucio looked at Mark and raised one eyebrow.

"Should be ready by Saturday, Marco," Mark Andrew said quietly.

"Great!" Marco Niccolo turned and ran from the room.

"Brother." Mark took a deep breath. He had regained part of his composure.

"Si?" Lucio stuffed his hands in his pockets and smiled after the boy.

"Would al Hafiz and the shariffe, the one we called Mad Mahmoud, be one and the same person?" Mark Andrew asked him almost casually.

Lucio's expression froze on his face and his eyes widened slightly. He turned his head slowly as the smile faded from his lips.

"They would," he said after a moment. "Holy Mary. I never realized…"

"God!" Mark Andrew was in a rage almost instantly. He tore from the library shouting in Gaelic and then in English and then in Latin as he rushed up the stairs. Lucio followed him out to the entry hall and stood staring up the stairs after him. He heard doors opening and closing and slamming all over the house. Michele came from the kitchen drying her hands on a dishtowel.

"What happened?" she asked wide-eyed and peered up the stairs into the gloomy second floor.

"Revelations," Lucio told her simply.

Paddy came in the front door accompanied by the two wolfhounds and Louis Champlain carrying his golf bag. Marco came running down the stairs to hide behind Michele's dress. Even the old gardener came from his room and stumped down the hallway to stand with the group in the foyer as they stood listening to Mark Andrew as he seemingly destroyed the second floor of his house. Simon joined them from somewhere at the rear of the house. He had apparently been outside. He paused to look at them and then looked up the stairs. Another door slammed and Merry shrieked.

"Saints preserve us!" The old gardener crossed himself.

Louis Champlain dropped his bag on the floor and started for the stairs. Lucio caught his arm and shook his head.

"Let it be," the Italian told him. "He won't hurt her."

Champlain frowned at him, but stepped back. Lucio was still her husband. If he wasn't upset, then it was not his place to say or do anything.

Simon cast a dark look at Lucio and started up the stairs slowly. He did not feel right about going up there, but he couldn't just stand there gawking like a fool.

"Where's John Paul?" Michele looked about.

“He went to the chapel,” Louis answered her and glanced at his watch. “About two hours ago.”

“It’s oll roight, lassie.” Paddy took Michele’s hand and then reached to ruffle Marco’s hair. “Let’s go see aboot thot chicken.”

Michele smiled down at him and then frowned up the stairs once more before allowing the clurichaun to lead her away down the hall.

“Chicken?” Champlain sniffed the aroma floating in from the kitchen. “I’m starving!”

The big Knight picked up his bag and followed the others out to the kitchen.

“Chicken!” The old gardener nodded. “I loike chicken. It gets in me teeth though. I hope she made some o’ those smashed ’tatoes and gravy. I loike smashed ’tatoes and gravy.”

Everyone left Lucio standing at the foot of the stairs.

“Revelations,” the Italian said again softly and shook his head. “The Apocalypse. Not’a my specialty.”

He turned and went back to the library and closed the door. The smell of the chicken fried chicken was driving him crazy. His supper had been albacore salad, apple slices, cottage cheese, boiled potatoes with sour cream and milk. He was starving! So Mark Andrew had thought the woman had killed his brother… That was a revelation to him as well. It explained a lot of things about Mark Andrew he had never understood to this day.

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“And you think this is a good idea, Brother?” D’Brouchart frowned at the phone and then at Armand de Bleu who stood looking at him from the other side of his desk. The young Knight was uncomfortable in the Master’s quarters.

“I do,” the Knight of the Apocalypse who Sees answered him from Switzerland. “The place he is in is deplorable. I believe that he would be better cared for in Berne. I could check on his progress personally if he were closer.”

"You know what we may have to do," the Grand Master shuddered. There was no doubt in his mind that John Paul's son was the one spoken of in the prophecy. The evil child. The spawn of Satan. Certainly, Simon's daughter, Oriel, did not fit the description and she was doing quite well. He had just gotten a progress report from her parents the day before. They had already enrolled her in one of the city's finest private primary schools for the gifted and talented. And the Ritter's son was a quiet, reflective boy, already showing signs of an exceptional intelligence and good humor. His parents were teaching him to read Latin and he was excelling in mathematics. But John Paul's son… it was a shame.

"I am aware of that, your Grace," von Hetz sighed into the phone. "I am thankful that Sir John has shown no interest in the boy. He would be devastated to learn of his condition. We may have to make arrangements for him… permanently."

"He never asks you about the child?" the Master asked. D'Brouchart had heard this before, but had a hard time believing that the Knight could show so little interest in his son no matter what the circumstances of his birth.

"Never. He refuses to speak of the child even when I have ventured to broach the subject with him," the Ritter told him for the hundredth time.

"Then he must have known all along," d'Brouchart said and let go a long breath. He nodded to de Bleu and the Knight fetched a bottle of mineral water from the small refrigerator in the Master's bedroom. "How do you propose to arrange this, Brother?"

"I have already made the arrangements, your Grace. I was merely awaiting your permission to proceed. We should make sure that he is well cared for until we can ascertain the truth. He is only six years old. There's still time."

"Yes." D'Brouchart took the water and turned it up to take a great swallow. "There is time. You will keep me posted and I want details, Ritter."

"Of course, your Grace," the Ritter answered quickly. He was greatly relieved that the Master had agreed to give the child some time. He remembered when it would not have been so.

The Grand Master punched the button on the phone after the farewells and handed the remote to de Bleu.

"How goes it with you, my son?" He studied the golden-eyed Knight curiously. He was always fascinated by Armand de Bleu's unusual eye color.

"Well, your Grace," Armand said noncommittally and bowed his head slightly.

"Good. Good. And de Lyons?" D'Brouchart finished off the bottle of water. "How is our Archer?"

"He is well, Sir," de Bleu smiled at the nickname de Lyons had received after the battle with the dragon.

"And the transcriptions?"

"Coming along, your Grace," the Knight of the Throne nodded. It was the same conversation every time. It was as if the Grand Master wanted to talk to him, but didn't know what to say. They had very little in common and very little background together. No tales to rehash except for the very recent occurrences in Scotland.

"Have a seat, Brother." D'Brouchart waved one hand at the chair Sir Philip and Simon had so often occupied in the past.

De Bleu sat down and crossed his legs. He fiddled with the buttons on the phone nervously.

"Tell me about the Angels of Destruction," d'Brouchart said as he leaned back in his chair causing it to squeak ominously. He put his hands behind his neck and cocked his head to one side before smiling at the young, nervous Knight. "I want to know all about them. Every detail."

"Well, Sir…" De Bleu frowned and stared up at the ceiling a moment collecting his thoughts concerning that time some thirty-five years earlier. "I was only about twenty or twenty-one at the time, but I remember it quite well. Not a forgettable thing at all. No, Sir. Master Argonne had convinced Master Champagne to help him…"

De Bleu began his story and before long, was totally caught up in it. The Master smiled to himself. He had to start somewhere making a new confidante for himself. It might as well be de Bleu. He lived at the Villa all the time, was readily available and had little, if any, interests outside the Order. He was a fair translator and becoming more adept at speaking in public as the years passed. Even though he looked to be only a boy, he was well over fifty.

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Simon stood in the hallway outside Merry's room listening for anything that might indicate that intervention was required, but he heard nothing. He could not imagine what might have set the Knight of Death off on such a tear. He hoped that his Brother would not ruin everything she had been working on in preparation for the ritual, but there was more between them than he had the right to interfere with. He had been very surprised that Lucio had not tried to intervene. Not only had he refrained from going up, he had prevented Louis Champlain from going up. He glanced at his watch. There would be more instructions, more prayers and orations before bed and he needed to make his own prayers before that and it was getting later and later.

He made his way back down to his room and knelt on the floor beside the bed, crossed himself and then began to repeat the pater noster. He had been neglecting his prayers lately and he felt extremely guilty for that. He was, after all, still a priest. He had obligations and vows and so on and so forth, but his heart wasn't in it and he knew that God knew this as well. To say empty prayers was probably a greater sin than not saying them at all. He got up and lay down on the bed instead, listening for sounds of explosions or other disasters from the house around him. As he drifted off to sleep, he thought of ways they might approach Merry concerning the problem with the Mad Arab. She never asked him to use his power of healing and he felt strange about asking her to use her powers of magick. Especially since he did not like magick at all. He didn't care if it was faery magick or the magick of King Solomon. It still bothered him immensely. Divine inspiration. The power of God. He could deal with these things, but they were not magick by his way of thinking.

He found himself in the midst of a huge crowd of dancing men and women. They appeared to be Jews or Hebrew, perhaps?. There was a long banquet table and all the women wore white. One of them, much taller than him and extremely beautiful danced in front of him, beckoning to him to dance with her. He stepped forward and almost fell on his face. He could not dance! He was drunk. His legs would not work properly. He caught himself on the table and looked up to see Merry looking at him accusingly.

"Why did you do it, Simon?" she asked him. "Why did you bring me here?"

He looked about and saw Mark Andrew standing near him with the golden sword drawn.

"You have broken your vows, Brother," Mark Andrew told him. "And the penalty for that is death."

"What vows have I broken, Brother?" Simon heard himself asking.

"You had sex on the Sabbath, Brother!" Mark Andrew told him. "You broke your vow."

Suddenly, he was on the floor. Mark Andrew raised the sword above him and then brought it down, pinning him neatly to the floor. He heard the sound of the blade as it grated into the wood below him.

"I didn't! Please listen…!" Simon screamed at him, but the pain was too great and Mark Andrew turned his back. As the light faded before his eyes and he drew his last breath, he heard the wails of many women shrieking and grieving his death even before he was dead.

Simon sat up in the bed. Sex on the Sabbath! The Jewish equivalent of Sunday, which lasted from Friday after sunset to Saturday evening at sunset. What was this?! He looked down at his stomach and was relieved to see only clear skin. No wound. He wiped the sweat from his forehead. The feeling of the sword skewering him had been very real. He sighed in relief and climbed out the bed. At least no one had thrown a chicken at him! Sex on the Sabbath? He'd never had sex on any day. At least not that he wanted to remember and that hadn't exactly been on Saturday, had it? And, furthermore, that had been more like a nightmare than sex. And what difference did it make? Saturday or Friday? Or… he gazed at his own reflection in the mirror for a few long moments. What was happening to him? He ran his fingers through his hair and went in search of Lucio. He needed to find out why Mark Andrew was so upset.

Chapter Ten of Seventeen
apply thine heart to understanding

John Paul made it back in time for supper with Louis, Paddy, Marco and Michele. They made short work of the chicken fried chicken and the old gardener ate more mashed potatoes and gravy than anyone Michele had ever known. They set about clearing up the dishes and Champlain took Marco out on the patio with the telescope to give him a lesson in astronomy. Champlain liked astronomy. It had been one of his hobbies off and on for three hundred years. This latest thing with the space telescopes made his head swim. So many stars and galaxies and novae and planets and on and on. He made an excellent teacher since he could teach the history of the science with greater accuracy than most college professors. And Marco soaked it up like a little sponge. His knowledge of physics stood the diminutive golfer in good stead when Champlain's mathematical abilities ran a bit short.

The gardener trundled off to bed, leaving Paddy, John Paul and Michele in the kitchen.

"Lassie." Paddy handed her the last dish from the table. "Wud ye care fer a nip and a smoke?"

Michele laughed at the little red-haired man and shook her head.

"Then how aboot a walk in th' moonlight?" He looked up at her hopefully and then winked at John Paul when he frowned at him. "Ye can come along too, Johnny. I dunna want ye t' be goin' aboot pea green with envy."

The unlikely trio grabbed their jackets and coats against the chill night air and let themselves out the front door into the moonlight. John Paul held Michele's hand while Paddy led the way across the meadow. He held his pipe between his teeth, puffing on it while he expounded on the beauties of the night. The wolfhounds followed along behind them, snuffling here and there after rabbits and other creatures that frequented Mark Andrew's meadow. Occasionally, they would route out one of Louis' golf balls and toss it in the air before bounding after it. Paddy led them across the meadow to the exposed rocks of the cairn that had replaced Mark's rath.

Paddy climbed up on the rocks and raised his arms out to his sides while Michele and John Paul poked about the rocks at the base of the mound, looking for arrowheads in the moonlight. Paddy looked up at the moon and began to sing a sad love song for them. John Paul sat on one of the boulders and Michele leaned her head on his shoulder. He wrapped one arm around her and began to rock back and forth in time to the song Paddy was singing.

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Simon found Lucio, still in the library, sound asleep with his head back at an odd angle on the couch. No doubt he would have a crick in his neck. The television was on, but no one was watching it. Simon picked up the remote and turned off the set. Lucio snapped up his head, frowned and rubbed the back of his neck.

"I was watching that, Brother," he lied.

"Really?" Simon sat down on the sofa next to him.

"No. That was a lie." Lucio rubbed his face and then stretched his arms over his head. He was going crazy, sleeping and starving and sleeping some more. "Merry will shoot me."

"Has Brother Ramsay come down yet?" Simon asked him cautiously. To think that Brother Ramsay was upstairs with Lucio's wife and had been up there for quite some time was disconcerting.

"No. At least, I don't believe so," Lucio grimaced and rolled his head around. A crick, of course.

"What was that all about?" Simon asked what he had come to ask.

"It seems that our Brother has learned some things he did not want to know," Lucio told him. "I think he might have known them all along. I think he just didn't want to remember them. At this point, I'm not sure."

"What things?" Simon pressed him. Simon, himself, had learned many things in the past few years he did want to know. Perhaps this was something else he could add to his list.

"He has learned that the woman he thought had killed his brother did not kill him at all. That she was just a victim of circumstance and that he killed her for no reason. That his brother went to save her and lost his life

in the process and then Mark Andrew made his death meaningless by killing her. A hard thing to learn after all these years. Even worse, he has also learned that it was al Hafiz who killed his brother. Another hard thing to learn. And further, he learned that al Hafiz is in love with my wife, I mean, his fiancée. Can you believe it, Brother? There are now three men in love with my wife and I am no longer in love with her. Santa Maria."

Simon said nothing to this loaded comment. Three men. Mark Andrew, himself and…

"Can you believe that the black magician is in love with Merry, too?" Lucio asked him lightly.

"I can believe almost anything," Simon said quietly. "It would explain why he didn't just kill her when she came to the chapel."

"But why didn't he kill you, Brother?" Lucio asked him. "For that matter, why didn't he simply kill Mark? He could have killed him the same day he killed his brother in Jerusalem."

"That's a good question."

"Sir Philip said that the legend of Semiramis and Marduk or Sennechereb, King of the Assyrians, was that he was so jealous of her that he would allow no man to look upon her except…" Lucio stopped suddenly and pushed himself up on the sofa.

"Except what, Brother?" Simon asked and turned a solemn look on the Italian. "You were about to say something. Pray continue. We are exhorted to speak honestly."

"It was nothing," Lucio muttered and picked up the TV remote and turned the set on again. He started surfing the channels absently. He wasn't drunk enough to start a fight with this feisty new version of the Healer.

Simon relieved him of the device and turned it off again.

"It was something," Simon told him. "What? He would allow no man to look upon her… except… except what? Whom?"

Lucio turned to look at him and lost the inner battle with his own good sense. He made a wry face, wrinkling his nose slightly and then raising his chin. "Except a priestly eunuch. I guess that's why he put you with her in the underworld. But I guess he underestimated you and her, no?"

Simon felt his face go deep red and then he closed his eyes. He cursed himself silently. Why had he pushed the issue? What was the point? These revelations would certainly garner top positions on his list!

((((((((((<O>))))))))))

Mark Andrew lay on the floor in Merry's room with his head buried in her lap. She leaned against the wall and stroked his hair with one hand, wondering if he was asleep.

"Mark?" She leaned over him and said his name softly. He stirred and then clenched his eyes shut. He did not want to wake up. He had been having no dreams.

"Mark Andrew," she said a bit more loudly. "You have to wake up. We have work to do."

He opened his eyes and turned his head only far enough to look up at her with one eye.

"I'm sorry," she told him again. What he had said had shocked her and astounded her and made her want to scream and cry and pull out her hair, but he had done enough of that for both of them and then they had almost, but not quite ruined all of her magickal preparations by indulging in a bit of uncontrolled passion on the bedroom floor. Only her determination to find her daughter kept her from giving in to him. It was the hardest thing she had ever done and she felt exhausted.

"Can't we just forget about all that for tonight?" he asked and she almost gave in. It was the third time he had asked her this. "Can't we just stay right here… together?" He ran one hand up her leg under her gown.

"No." She pushed him up gently. "We would have to start all over and I don't think Simon or Lucio would appreciate it much or understand."

Mark Andrew frowned and then sat up.

"Before I go, just one kiss?" he asked.

"No."

"But what would one kiss hurt?" he pouted.

"It would not be proper. You promised." She got up stiffly and then stretched. "Did you find that herb for me?"

"Aye," he nodded. "I happen to have it right here." He reached in one of his numerous pockets and pulled out a small square of folded brown paper. "But maybe I should take it myself."

"No!" She reached for it and he held it out of her reach. "Come on, Mark Andrew. You have more control than this. I know you do."

"What is it worth to you?" He scooted away from her on the floor.

"You promised!"

She crossed her arms over her stomach and patted her foot on the floor.

"One kiss." He got up and stood holding the packet behind his back.

"Mark." She lowered her head and eyed him sternly.

"Merry," he mimicked her tone.

At least he was feeling better now. Perhaps too much better.

"Oll roighty then." He held the herb out to her. "'ere ye go."

She reached for the paper and he grabbed her wrist, pulled her close and kissed her briefly before letting her go.

"Now there, you see?" He smiled. "No harm done."

"I certainly hope not!" she told him irritably. "Now how does this work?" She opened the packet and eyed the little bundle of neatly tied brown and yellow grass-like sprigs.

"Now you didn't bargain for the concoction. You just said the herb." He pursed his lips and crossed his arms over his stomach and patted his foot in perfect imitation of her former pose. "That will cost you a bit more."

"Mark Andrew Ramsay! If you don't behave, I'm going right now to ask Louis Champlain to take your place!" she almost shouted at him. "You will tell me how this is made and you will tell me right now! Do you understand?"

Mark's expression changed and he blinked at her once before jerking his head to one side.

"Steep the herb in water for five minutes. Add two spoons of honey or sugar and drink it while its warm. Or you can put it in something else to make it taste better. It'll last about four hours," he said almost rotely.

"Does it have to be warm?" she asked him.

"No." He shook his head. "It acts faster if it is."

"Thank you!" she said curtly and he blinked again.

"Thank you for what?" he asked and looked about in confusion.

"Now look, go on downstairs or go take a shower or something." She pushed him toward the door. "I'll be down in a bit to talk to you and the others. We need to talk about the instruments and the suffumigations. Afterwards…" she pushed him out the door "we'll make our confessions and say our prayers. Then you can go off and find Paddy. He went into

town today and brought back some more white wine. I think you might need some."

Mark Andrew allowed her to push him out the door and then she closed it behind him.

Once he was gone, she let out a great sigh of relief. That had been very close. He would have ruined everything if she had allowed him to stay, but his response to her command had surprised her. So that was how it worked. Neat! She had commanded him to tell her what she wanted to know and he had done it and he didn't even remember it! No wonder that her Mystery was so very dangerous. She could see how someone could be tempted to use such a thing for personal gain. She shuddered at the thought and crossed herself. Another thought occurred to her. If al Hafiz knew what knowledge she possessed, it was no wonder he was after her. He didn't love her. He loved her Mystery! He wanted her knowledge! This thought frightened her immensely. And if he had been visiting her in the Abyss and she didn't even remember it, then he certainly possessed some power similar to what she now held over her 'disciples'. She wondered what he had learned from her and just what had transpired when he had visited her. It was a horrifying thought. She would have to use the magick to protect herself from him, but many things could be accomplished during the one rite she was planning. She could combine requests if she was careful.

Now she had three separate agendas. The search. The curse. The banishment. And Mark Andrew was in such a state. She wished that she could do something for him as well to ease his mind, but that would be using her Mystery for personal gain. That was simply something she could not do.

Humming a tune to herself as she prepared her bath, she realized that she was getting better at this with each passing day. She no longer had to concentrate to the point of exhaustion and the words of the invocations and incantations and prayers and orations were beginning to flow more easily from her lips.

Tomorrow night would be hard. Tomorrow night she would face her greatest challenge yet. Not once, but three times. And there was still the problem of Michele and John Paul to worry about. Something would have to be resolved there and soon. She hadn't even been able to broach the

subject of toys for Marco with John Paul. How would she be able to face this new problem?

((((((((((((<O>))))))))))))

John Paul's son's condition highly disturbed the Grand Master. At first, he had taken it quite well thinking it not much of a surprise, but then, the longer he thought about it, the more agitated he became. He remembered a time when he would have personally gone to see the child and would have made a decision then and there concerning its future. He would not have hesitated to do whatever had to be done, but now everything was muddled and sullied with entanglements to such a degree, he barely knew up from down. Now was not a good time to be without his best and most trusted advisor and companion. Sir Philip's advice would have been priceless, but God had seen fit to remove Philip from him and had further seen fit to replace him with John Paul Sinclair-Ramsay. Supposedly the troubled boy's father according to von Hetz.

John Paul could never take Sir Philip's place in the Master's opinion and yet, the prophet seemed capable of taking all their places at once! Edgard was tired and he longed for a rest, a holiday and never before had he ever considered such a thing. Just one or two days without thinking, perhaps, sitting on the Ritter's balcony overlooking a serene alpine lake in the Swiss Alps. One day without some new and terrible report coming in from the outposts. One day without some new atrocity reported in the news. Just one day of respite would have been welcome.

All the turmoil within their small circle was magnified a thousand fold in the world beyond the walls of the Villa and it seemed there was less and less he could do about it. The idea that no one in the Council could take his place was never far from his mind. He had always slept better knowing that Philip could take over as Master even though Philip never admitted that he was capable. William Montague would have been a good candidate for Seneschal, but he was completely immersed in his work in London and unwilling to give it up. Barry of Sussex would have to be the next in line, but Barry was a little volatile at times. Act first, think later would not stand them in good stead. Edgard preferred someone as sharp as the Golden

Eagle and level-headed as Louis Champlain with Ramsay's courage, dogged determination and intelligence, but no such man existed. The Eagle had… severe problems. But who of them didn't have problems? And though Ramsay was certainly strong enough in several respects, his very volition made one leery of his ability to keep the Order in one piece. Champlain was strong enough physically and was thoughtful, kind and slow to anger, but he was even worse than Sir Barry when it came to leadership qualities and taking charge, very reluctant. Barry would simply buffet the Council members on their heads at the meetings and then tell his unconscious Brothers to listen while Champlain might very well become overwhelmed and unable to speak at all. The younger members were too inexperienced. Of course, there was Meredith, but she was after all, a woman in the first place and an inexperienced Knight without an inkling of the sorts of political problems he faced on a daily basis for hundreds of years. He could not begin to imagine her working behind the scenes with movers and shakers without facing the usual sexist problems associated with the unenlightened world. Hell, he had his own sexist opinions of her that could never be changed. Political correctness was an American illusion from which he did not suffer. She had her good qualities and would probably make a good leader when she had enough experience forced upon her, but for now, she was still learning much like de Bleu and de Lyons. Someday… someday… who knew? A Grand Mistress? He chuckled to himself and thought he might be interested to see it occur.

But he would have to decide. He had many decisions to make. He picked up the stack of papers de Bleu had brought for him and shuffled through them again. There were four files on the table in front of him and he had come to the conclusion that these men would be the best possible replacements for the apprentices his Council members had lost. One for Ramsay, one for Sister Meredith, one for John Paul and one for himself. He still had one more candidate to find. Simon would need one of the priests from the outposts. A young priest. Most of the Order's priests were well over thirty years old. Never had they had so little to choose from among the exoteric members of the Order. He would have to call them in from the fields and meet with them individually before arranging for them to meet with his Knights. A more persnickety gaggle of geese could not have been found in the world. The very thought depressed him.

He pushed his glasses up on his head and picked up the second stack to begin looking for some likely prospects among the clergy. Von Hetz, at least, had already taken a new apprentice. Von Hetz was an enigma. Surely he had the experience and the longevity to be Master, but would he accept it? Would he be able to control Ramsay and Dambretti? Ramsay would certainly defer to the Ritter in most things, but Dambretti held a grudge against the man. The Ritter had looked into Dambretti's head on more than one occasion and Dambretti was not a forgiving soul. Furthermore, in spite of all his experience and knowledge, the Apocalyptic Knight had already voiced his desire to remain where he was and the Master owed von Hetz a great deal. At least the dark Knight was keeping up with his duties and also doing Dambretti's former work at the Villa, keeping him posted on the complicated conditions developing around the globe. As soon as Dame Meredith's rites were over, he would summon the Golden Eagle to Italy and he would have a very long talk with him before he went off to search for the child.

Now there was another sticky situation growing worse by the moment. Rumor had it that the child was somewhere in North America and the rumors had come from a fairly good authority.

He leaned back and rubbed the bridge of his nose.

Simon! Simon had asked permission to marry. What a shock that had been. And he had granted it. Another shock. Who did his son have in mind? And why? It didn't seem possible that Simon would want to bring another stranger, yet another woman, into their circle. The Master was already concerned about John Paul's wife. There was a problem brewing there and he had no experience to draw on. He could not just let her walk away. She was known to persons who might try to use her against them. If she left, they would not be able to protect her, but if she wanted to leave, they had no right to stop her and he would not, could not, send Mark Andrew after her as he had sent him after so many in the past. Those men had been Templars. They knew the penalty. They knew. It was a terrible dilemma. He couldn't allow her to leave and he couldn't force her to stay. The only alternative would be… no. There had to be some other answer. He would pray about it.

((((((((((<O>))))))))))

“Thair ye go, laddie!” Paddy hopped down from the stone he had been standing on and pointed to the center of the rocks piled about the mound. “Now go on, hurry now. Go on down and take a peek.”

Michele hugged John Paul’s arm as he peered into the opening between the rocks. There was a bluish glow in the cavern that had a shimmery quality about it and it made her think that there might be water down there. In fact, the air issuing from the cavern was cool and refreshing, almost alluring.

John Paul smiled down at her before stepping cautiously into the opening.

“I don’t know… John Paul,” Michele hesitated.

“Michele…” John said sternly and then stepped inside the cavern. Surprisingly, they found a set of stairs carved into the bedrock, leading down into the depths of the cave. Michele looked back over her shoulder to see the short figure of the clurichaun silhouetted against the moonlight in the meadow.

“Go on now, lassie,” he called to her. “T’will only take a few minutes and ye’ll be back before ye know it. And don’t ferget me crystals!”

John Paul tugged on her slightly and she smiled up at him, though she did not feel like smiling.

She did not like caves!

((((((((((<O>))))))))))

Merry found Simon in the library, sitting at the computer. Lucio was absorbed in a soccer game broadcast in Italian. He didn’t even notice her entry, but continued mumbling under his breath. Apparently his team was losing. She touched Simon on the shoulder and he looked up from the computer screen, blinking at her in surprise. When he opened his mouth to speak, she put one finger against his lips and motioned for him to follow her. They passed behind the distraught Italian and silently into the hall.

She led him up to her room and then had to push him inside when he hesitated at the door.

"Go on now, Simon!" she said. "I promise not to hurt you."

He turned a worried look on her and then frowned when he saw her frown. She was teasing him.

Simon stepped into the room, expecting Mark Andrew to be there, but the Knight of Death was not in evidence. The room was familiar enough. He had stayed in it a few times over the years when the downstairs rooms were unavailable. He closed his eyes as the scent of her perfume and the smell of vanilla and cinnamon washed over him.

"Merry… Sister," he said and started to back out. She pushed him inside and closed the door.

"Simon… Brother!"

Merry walked around him to the dresser where she lit a white candle and then put the match in a brass censer full of sweet smelling incense. "Stop with the modesty thing. You promised. Now is not the time for it. We have some very… important things to do here and we don't have time for silliness. My God, we shared the same bed for..."

"Hush! I like silliness, Sister," he protested and stood watching her nervously as she lit more candles around the room. "It covers a number vile emotions."

"Vile emotions? You? Puh-lease," she said and shook her head. She wore a long, white, loose-fitting gown with symbols embroidered in red silk on the cuffs and the hem. "We have to say your confession."

"We? I don't want to confess."

"This is not that kind of confession," she told him. "This is a general confession that must be made prior to the cleansing."

"Oh, I see," Simon nodded. This was more of the ritual preparation. What had he been thinking? Perhaps he did need to confess to her.

"Now, that's better." She turned to him and blew out the candle in her hand and laid it on the dresser. "We must kneel and I will say the words first and you will repeat them. OK?"

"OK," he repeated her word. "Where?"

"Here," she said and pointed to the floor in front of the dresser. "It doesn't really matter."

"Oh," Simon muttered as he got on his knees and she knelt facing him.

"Now this is a bit long. Would you like a pillow for your knees?"

"I don't think so!" he said indignantly. "I'm a priest."

"All right then." She reached to take the censer from the dresser and made a circle with the smoking vessel in front of his face three times. "Now bow your head."

Simon obeyed her and she placed one hand on top of his head.

"O Lord of Heaven and of Earth, before Thee do I confess my sins, and lament them, cast down and humbled in Thy presence. For I have sinned before Thee," she began and he repeated the words as she spoke them, almost at the same time she did, perhaps only a syllable or two behind her. Their voices blended together and it sounded like an eerie echoing litany. His voice was smooth and practiced. She paused and frowned at him. He had done this before. He was very good at it. The sounds of their slightly out of sync voices fascinated her. She continued and he followed without missing a beat. "I detest the crimes which I have committed by evil thoughts, vain and impure meditations, false suspicions, and rash judgments; by the evil consent which I have readily given unto the advice of the wicked, by lust of impure and sensual pleasures; by my idle words, my lies, and my deceit; by my false vows in various ways; and by my continual slander and calumny."

"…lumny," Simon finished the prayer and Merry smiled at him in spite of the solemnity of the occasion. He was absolutely precious. She felt her face go red at this absurd thought. Simon would not have appreciated it. But he did not see her smile, nor her embarrassment. He still had his head bowed and his eyes closed. She had barely gotten him into her room. How on earth would she get through tomorrow night with him? She shook off the thought and continued.

"I detest also the crimes which I have committed within; the treachery and discord which I have incited; my curiosity, greed, false speaking, violence, malediction, murmurs, blasphemies, vain words, insults, dissimulations; my sins against God by the transgression of the ten commandments, by neglect of my duties and obligations, and by want of love towards God and towards my neighbor."

"…bor." Simon opened one eye and looked up at her suspiciously before bowing his head again. He felt he was confessing many sins of which he, himself, was not guilty.

"O Most Mighty and All Powerful Father, grant through Thine unbounded Mercy that I may both see and know all the Spirits which I invoke, so that by their means I may see my will and desire accomplished,

by Thy Sovereign grandeur, and by Thine Ineffable and Eternal Glory, Thou Who art and Who wilt be for ever the Pure and Ineffable Father of All."

"…All," Simon finished again and waited.

Merry took her hand from his head and lifted his chin slightly. He looked up at her and waited. She nodded and then stood up. She took the censer and walked around him, clockwise, three times then stopped in front of him. She handed him the censer and then formed her hands into fists and crossed her arms over her heart.

"O Lord, I commit my Body and my Soul unto Thee, seeing I put my trust in none beside Thee; it is on Thee alone that I rely; O Lord my God aid me; O Lord hear me in the day and hour wherein I shall invoke Thee. I pray Thee by Thy Mercy not to put me in oblivion, nor to remove me from Thee. O Lord be Thou my succour, Thou Who art the God of my salvation. O Lord make me a new heart according unto Thy loving Kindness. These, O Lord, are the gifts which I await from Thee, O my God and my Master, Thou Who livest and reignest unto the Ages of the Ages. Amen."

The confession and prayer was over. She nodded to Simon and he stood up.

"That's it." She smiled at him. "You did that very well."

Simon bowed his head slightly to her and then smiled. "I am a priest, you know."

"I keep forgetting that," she laughed and escorted him to the door. "Now would you please send Lucio up?"

"Are you going to do the exact same thing with him?" Simon turned to look back at her from the doorway.

"Yes, of course. Why?"

"He may not be so cooperative," Simon told her darkly and then left her standing in the open doorway.

The Healer walked slowly down the hall and then down the stairs. The exercise with Merry had been another very strange experience. He had never confessed so many sins and crimes at once in his life and with each sin or crime he had listed which he had ever committed, he saw the crime or the sin again with crystal clarity in front of his face. The ones he had never committed were simply black like an empty spot, but the others were most disturbing. He even saw things that he had completely forgotten. Only slander, calumny, false vows and impure meditations were blank. Everything else was filled with brilliant memory flashes and he wondered

how his mind could have shown him such a multitude of images and yet allowed him to keep up with her words. Now he was worried about what Lucio Dambretti would do when this happened to him. Certainly, Lucio Dambretti had many more sins and crimes in his colorful past than he, Simon of Grenoble, who had lived the sheltered life as a Cistercian monk and then as a priest for the Templars. Especially a priest without the usual temptations faced by normal men. He rolled his eyes at the thought and knew that he was committing another sin just by thinking of such a thing. He picked up his pace and went to search out Lucio who was still sitting on the sofa bemoaning his soccer game, which was fortunately over.

Simon paused in the doorway and leaned against the frame, smiling mischievously at the Knight of the Golden Eagle.

"Brother, your turn is up," he said when Lucio finally noticed him.

"Che cosa e` esso?" Lucio frowned. "What are you talking about?"

"Upstairs. Sister Meredith wants you," Simon continued and smiled like the proverbial cat that ate the canary.

Lucio reached for the remote and turned off the television reluctantly before standing up to stretch.

"What are we in for tonight, Brother?" Lucio eyed him suspiciously.

"Oh, just more prayers," Simon told him as he walked by him. "And…"

Lucio glanced back at him. "And what?"

"Confession." Simon smiled at him.

"More confessions?" Lucio was taken aback. "I thought we've been doing that already."

"This one is different, Brother," Simon shrugged. "Prepare yourself."

"I have nothing to confess, Brother. I am as pure as the driven snow," Lucio told him indignantly.

"You might be surprised." Simon raised both eyebrows.

"Santa Maria!" Lucio muttered and drew a deep breath. He was hungry and he was tired and he was bored with the whole ritual thing. He jammed his hands in the pockets of his slacks and started up the stairs. The Master had phoned him earlier and had a fairly good idea of where little Lucia was. Why go through all this? Why not wait for a bit more intelligence from abroad and then go?

Simon went off to search for Mark Andrew. He hadn't seen him come down from Merry's room after he had stormed up there earlier.

((((((((((<O>))))))))))

Mark Andrew was in the laboratory. Working on the sword again. Simon drew up a stool next to him and picked up the gold and silver hilt Lucio had been working on. Only the stones were missing from the settings. Mark was polishing the shining blade.

"Are you all right, Brother?" Simon asked him after a moment of perusing the hilt.

"I'm well enough, why?" Mark Andrew looked up at him.

"You were upset earlier," Simon told him something he already knew.

"Aye. But I'm all right now," Mark Andrew told him quietly. Too quietly. Simon recognized this mood. It was dangerous. The Knight of Death had been thinking again.

"You are thinking dark thoughts, Brother," Simon ventured.

"Aye," Mark admitted freely. "Dark thoughts for dark times."

"And what would you propose to do about the Mad Arab?" Simon asked him.

"I am no sorcerer, Brother." Mark Andrew shook his head and brushed back his hair. "I have nothing to fight him with other than my sword and he has shown me twice already that I have no strength against him."

"Your tattoo would seem to show otherwise," Simon reminded him.

"That was another place and another situation. I had help." Mark Andrew stood up and held the sword out along his arm inspecting its surface carefully.

"You have help now," Simon told him and laid the hilt down on the workbench. "John Paul knows how to deal with him and so does Sister Meredith."

"I know."

Mark laid the blade on the table below the hilt and looked at it thoughtfully.

"Did you ask Sister Meredith to help you with your problem?" Simon measured out the length of the sword in his head and tried to imagine Marco wielding it. It seemed about right for the boy.

“I did,” Mark Andrew answered and remember how much he had wanted to hold her and stay with her, but he’d only been able to steal one kiss.

“And she said she would?” Simon looked at him in surprise.

“She refused me,” Mark shrugged and then smiled slightly.

“Then she won’t use her magick against al Hafiz ?” Simon frowned.

“Oh! That! Oh!” Mark Andrew said quickly and picked up the blade again. He took it to the oven where he picked up a brown cloth, which he rubbed along the metal. “No. I didn’t ask her about that.”

Simon shook his head. What did he think he was talking about?

“Are you going to ask her?” Simon asked after a moment.

“Aye,” Mark nodded. “Do you think this is too heavy for the boy?”

Simon took the blade from him. It was light and perfectly balanced on his index finger.

“I think its just fine.” Simon raised both eyebrows. He could see that Mark Andrew was already in a very bad frame of mind. He wondered how he would fare in tonight’s exercise with Merry, but perhaps he was in a dark mood because he had already made his confession?

Chapter Eleven of Seventeen
Because I have called, and ye refused

Paddy Puffingtowne held the front doors open for John Paul and Michele as they ran inside just ahead of the rain. The storm had come up suddenly and the first huge drops were beginning to fall on the stone steps as they rushed in the doors. They stopped in the hall, laughing and giggling like children and Paddy stood shaking his head and clucking his tongue at them.

"Ye wud 'ave been back sooner had ye listened t' Paddy," the clurichaun chastised them, but smiled.

"Bubba John!" Marco Niccolo called to them from the library. "Aunt Michele! Come and see what I've found!"

They shook themselves off and went into the library where Marco and Louis Champlain were working at the computer desk.

Marco had found a website that had sound-bytes from one of the moons of Jupiter and they were listening to the electromagnetic song of the planetoid as it orbited the gas giant. John Paul listened to the sounds in fascination and to Marco as the boy expounded all technicalities of the phenomenon. Michele looked at Louis in confusion and the big Knight smiled and shrugged.

"He is the physicist," Louis told her. "I just like the pictures."

"Come and see wot yer brother has found fer ye, Nicky, me boy." Paddy took the 'physicist's' arm and dragged him from the desk.

John Paul unfolded a white handkerchief on one of his mother's black lacquered tables and laid a handful of colorful stones on the white cloth.

"Oh, wow!" Marco's eyes grew large with wonder. The stones were beautiful. Blue, red, crystal clear, turquoise and green.

"I think ye got a few extra thair, laddie," Paddy commented as he leaned over the table to peer at the rocks. "But nae problem. These air fer ye swoard," Paddy told Marco and picked up one of the black, shiny rocks. "Except fer these." Paddy put the black ones in his pocket. "And these." He picked out three pink ones and put them in another of the pockets on his vest.

Marco picked up each stone and held it up to look at it in the light. They were not cut in the fashion of modern gemstones, but they were polished though irregularly shaped. Their natural beauty was in no way diminished by their form.

"Which one is mine?" Marco asked excitedly.

"This one. A moonstone," Michele said picked up a smooth, pearlescent stone and he took it reverently in his hands. "And this one is a bloodstone for your father." She held out a flat oval stone, dark green with bright red spots in it. "And this blue one is your mother's stone. Virgo's sapphire."

She went on to show him the other stones, which would decorate the reverse side of the hilt. Mark's onyx, black as midnight, a large, rough diamond for John Paul's Aries and a lilac amethyst representing herself.

"This is great!" Marco looked up at her. "Where'd you get them?"

"Aw, now, laddie!" Paddy wagged one finger in the boy's face. "Thot wud be Paddy's secret. Remember… a secret's not a secret when more than one knows it and both are still alive."

Champlain examined the stones as well and eyed John Paul curiously. He knew they hadn't found these just lying around in the meadow. He wondered what they had been up to and he wondered about the pink and black stones Paddy had put in his pockets. Stones held a special interest for the Frankish Knight. He had spent the greater part of his life waiting for a particular Stone himself.

"Come on, Johnny." Paddy took up the cloth and handed it up to the prophet. "Let's go and show these to Andy."

John Paul nodded and Paddy dragged him from the library.

"Come show me more about this singing moon, Marco." Michele turned to the boy as a great clap of thunder shook the house. She jumped and then laughed. "Before the electric is gone."

Marco went happily back to the computer and began to confuse her even more though she sat down next to him and listened attentively.

Louis watched them for a few moments and then followed the others out of the library. He had questions and he wanted to see this 'swoard' his Brother was making for the boy.

((((((((((((<O>))))))))))))

Lucio Dambretti was having a problem. He did not want to confess anything to Merry. It didn't sound like a good idea to him at all. He stood facing her in front of the mirror of the dresser with a deep frown on his dark face. The long scar on his cheek stood out in stark relief, making him look a bit ominous as it usually did when he was mad.

"But it is part of the rite!" Merry pleaded with him. "And it is a general confession. Nothing specific. All you have to do is repeat the words after me and then I'll say a short prayer and it will be done."

"A general confession?" Lucio asked and shook his head slightly. "I've never heard of such a thing. You're not talking about a reverse confession, are you?"

"A rever… no! It covers everything… just in case," she explained and picked up the censer from the dresser. "Just do as I tell you and it will soon be over. Would you like a pillow for your knees?"

"I would like a pillow for my head," Lucio muttered. He got to his knees in front of her and let go a long sigh. "All right. Go with it."

Merry passed the censer in front of him three times and he used his hands to pull the smoke toward his face, closing his eyes. Simon had not done this. She was reminded of the movies she had seen wherein American Indians had done this in their ceremonial councils.

She placed her hand on his head and he bowed his head and closed his eyes.

Lucio did not repeat the prayer as Simon had done. He waited for her to pause and then repeated the entire phrase after her. The first part went very well, but then, when she began to list the sins, something went terribly wrong.

"I detest the crimes which I have committed by evil thoughts…" She paused again for him to repeat the phrase.

"I detest the crimes which I have committed by evil thoughts… whoa! Wait! Stop!" He held up one hand to her and frowned.

"Lucio!" She pursed her lips in a scowl. "You have to finish the confession!"

"All right. Just a minute." He closed his eyes, swallowed hard and then bowed his head again.

"…vain and impure meditations, false suspicions, and rash judgments…" She picked up where she had left off.

"… vain and impure medita… ow! Oh! No. Wait a minute!" He held up his hand again and then pressed the bridge of his nose between his thumb and forefinger. "…meditations, false suspicions… dammit! What are you doing?" He looked up at her. His face was flushed a deeper red now and he seemed to be holding his breath.

"Lucio Apolonio Dambretti!" Merry put her hands on her hips and patted one foot impatiently.

"…and rash judgments!" he almost shouted at her and then looked away toward the wall.

"… by lust of impure and sensual pleasures…" She replaced her hand on his head and tried to continue.

"… by lust of impure… Oh, my God! Santa Maria!" Lucio slapped her hand away from his head and started to stand up, but she pushed him back down. He fell over and then got up again.

"What is wrong with you?!" she asked him angrily. "You are ruining this ceremony!"

"I'm ruining it?!" He looked totally shocked and almost sick now. "Wait. All right. OK. Go ahead. Slowly."

"… by my idle words, my lies, and my deceit…" She grabbed hold of his hair this time and held fast.

"… by my idle words… my lies!… Holy Mary! And my deceit! Are you seeing this?!" He looked up at her. His eyes were wide with what looked like fear now. He pressed his fingertips to his temples.

"… by my false vows in various ways…" She went on in spite of his behavior.

"….by my false vows in various ways…" He repeated in a small voice.

"… and by my continual slander and calumny." She finished the first part. Her heart was beating rapidly now as she expected another outburst.

"… and by my continual slander… and … and … and…" He bowed his head and closed his eyes again. "… and calumny."

"I detest also the crimes which I have committed within; the treachery and discord which I have incited." Merry was gritting her teeth now. It was very difficult to hold him in place.

"I detest also the crimes which I have committed within; the treachery. Oh, no. And discord. Che cosa e` esso? … which I have incited." He shook his head again but did not move.

"… my curiosity, greed, false speaking, violence, malediction, murmurs, blasphemies, vain words…" Merry listed the sins and crimes.

"… my curiosity…. Greed! Santa Maria. Wait. Wait. No. False speaking…I never did that! Did I?" Lucio let his head fall back and he looked up at the ceiling. Merry had to let go of his head or rip out all his hair. "I can't do this, Meredith. Please stop. It isn't fair. It's not fair."

"Yes, you can," Merry told him, now a bit more sympathetic. She was beginning to undrstand what Simon had said when he had left. Lucio might not be so cooperative. So this was what he was talking about! "Go on, now."

"… violence… oh, oh. No. That was not my fault! That is not fair! It was necessary at the time. Malediction. That was not malediction… was it? Murmurs. Uh, oh. But I never meant any of that. It was just an expression at the time…" He let his head fall forward again and Merry was truly disturbed now. It seemed he was actually conversing or arguing with someone she could not see. "Not blasphemies. I never… but that was not blasphemy. That was just a figure of speech! Everyone says that. Vain words. Yes. Yes. Insults. Only in defense. Surely that is not such a terrible sin. Dissimulations. I never knew about this. No one told me… I really didn't know this. I'm sorry. I was ignorant. I didn't…"

Merry was truly alarmed now. Lucio had gone past where she had stopped. He was now making the confession just as it should have been, but he was not waiting for her to say the words. She stared at him in disbelief and then slowly placed her hand back on his head.

"My sins against God by the transgressions of the ten commandments. Not all ten… Surely... But I confessed that before and I received my penance! By neglect of my duties and obligations. That is true, but only because there were more pressing matters… I realize that, but he has others… surely someone could… and by want of love towards God and towards my neighbor. Oh, but that was not a neighbor! Yes, yes, but of course, that was a neighbor, but he was… I understand now. I see."

Lucio remained where he was with his head bowed and his eyes closed. The confession was over.

Merry grabbed up the censer and quickly encircled him three times and then reached to lift his chin slightly. He did not open his eyes. He was barely breathing.

"Lucio?" She leaned toward him. "Take the censer, Brother."

Lucio opened his eyes and took the brass bowl from her. He looked as if he were in a daze.

Merry crossed her arms over her heart and said the closing prayer.

"Amen. Amen. And Amen," she said almost breathlessly. She was overcome with relief when it was over.

Lucio stood up. He looked at her blandly and then set the censer on the floor. She stood watching as he went quietly to the door and let himself out. When he was gone, she collapsed into the chair by her bed. The clock on her dresser showed close to midnight and she still had to get through this with Mark Andrew! She had had no idea that this would affect Dambretti so profoundly. Nor had she realized that it would be so very taxing on her own nerves. She felt as if she had been run down by a train and that she had done him a grave disservice.

((((((((((((<O>))))))))))))

Lucio walked down the hall to his room, stopped at the door and then turned around and went downstairs. He was in a state of shock. He'd had no idea his sins were so great. Now he felt totally empty. And terribly hungry. He made his way downstairs and went to the wine cellar. Paddy was there waiting for him.

"'ere ye go, Lucky." The clurichaun held up a bottle of white wine for him.

"Grazie, signor," Lucio took the bottle and looked at it blankly. He patted the clurichaun on the head and got a scathing look in return. He did not notice. Paddy took the bottle back and pulled out the cork with his teeth. Lucio took it again and turned it up, taking a long drink.

"Is Merry ready fer Andy?" Paddy asked and cocked his head to one side, looking at him curiously.

"Has he not already made his confession?" Lucio asked and frowned at him as if he were lost. He wiped his mouth on the back of his hand. The

wine felt warm in his empty stomach.

"Nooo, I'm afraid not, laddie," Paddy apologized and took his arm and escorted him to the stairs. "Now go on out to th' parlor, Lucky. I'll be out shortly t' 'ave a nip and a smoke withee."

Lucio nodded and started slowly up the stairs.

Paddy stood watching him go, shaking his head sadly.

"Andy!" Paddy called and turned toward the laboratory door. He skipped across the cellar and stuck his head inside the lab where Mark Andrew was busily attaching the blade to the hilt of Marco's sword. "Andy. Merry's waitin' fer ye."

Mark Andrew stood up and dusted off his hands and then his pants.

"Do I look oll roight?" he asked and frowned down at his dusty clothes. "I mean, I'm a bit dirty."

"I dunna think she'll take much notice," Paddy answered. Andy had no idea what was about to happen to him. "Now go on up and get it o'er with, laddie."

Mark's frown deepened. "Wot's th' problem?" he asked suspiciously.

"Here!" Paddy reached into his pocket and pulled out one of the pink stones. "Put this in yer pocket, me boy."

"Why?" Mark Andrew took the rock and looked at it curiously. He knew a great deal about rocks and gems, but the identity of this stone eluded him.

"Fer luck." Paddy winked at him. "Ye're goin' t' need it."

"I don't need luck. I need a break and bottle of Scotch," Mark Andrew laughed at him, but put the stone in his pocket after examining it closely. "And I need a good pot of mutton stew and maybe a bit of brown bread to go with it. And…"

"Now, now, Andy! Stop thinking with yer stomach!" Paddy admonished him as he pushed him toward the stairs.

Mark Andrew shrugged him off and started up the stairs.

((((((((((((<O>))))))))))))

While she waited for Mark to make his appearance, Merry tried to keep her mind off of just how difficult the encounter with the dark Scottish

temper might prove to be. She cleaned up the mess Lucio had left behind and checked her face in the mirror. She actually had dark circles under her eyes and her complexion was not as rosy as usual. When she leaned closer to check the tiny veins visible around her pupils, she noticed a glittering bit of brass embedded in between the glass and the frame. She brushed back her hair and plucked at the metal with one fingernail. What proved to be a small metal ring slid out of the wood and bent back on a tiny hinge.

She toyed with the ring for several seconds, wondering what purpose it might have served and then tugged on it slightly. The mirror popped open and then swung forward, revealing a large recess in the wall behind it. Three dusty shelves held a number of weathered leather albums with more brass fittings at the corners and deeply tooled, but fading Celtic designs in the covers. Her breath caught in her throat at the site of this hidden treasure and she looked around quickly as if expecting to see Mark looking over her shoulder.

After removing the top volume and blowing the dust everywhere, she closed the cabinet and returned to her bedroom where she sat down to take a look at what could only be something belonging to a former occupant of the room she now called her own. This room had not been Mark's that she knew of, but it was his house. It was possible that he might have once occupied the room. She looked around guiltily at the mess she had made of his formerly simple furnishings. The dark mahogany of the bedside table gleamed from beneath a lace doily covered with dark pink roses. The matching armoire stood open, exposing her clothes, now seemingly completely out of place as well as five years out of fashion in the heavy wood. The dresser that almost matched the armoire, that she had spent a small fortune locating and then buying and shipping in from Italy was cluttered with perfume decanters, pictures of John Paul as a baby, incense burners, matches, empty water goblets, old magazines and even one of the wolfhound's toys. She sighed at her own untidiness and made a silent vow to clean up the room and return it to its former austere glory as soon as the magick rituals were complete. Mark never complained that she had taken over his house. Never mentioned that she had shared one of his beds with Lucio for seven years in his absence even though they had replaced the mattress twice in that time. Never mentioned much of anything.

Letting go a second sigh, she opened the creaky leather tome and smiled. Photographs! Very old, yellowing, fading, but still quite well

preserved, glued carefully at each corner with little L-shaped pieces of paper. Someone had taken a lot of time and care making the album. The first picture, strangely enough was a picture of the house. There was more grass and less driveway, but definitely the same house. An ancient, yet shiny new, lawn tractor sat in front of the steps. Leaning closer, she recognized Simon d'Ornan's smiling visage. The Healer was sitting behind the steering wheel with both arms in the air, grinning like a madman while a pair of muddy rubber boots protruded from beneath the mowing attachment behind him. Another, younger man sat on the bottom step in front of the house, slump-shouldered, gazing forlornly at his bare feet.

Merry frowned. Some kind of joke, apparently, but who had taken the picture? Mark? It seemed out of character. And who was the young man? He had light brown or blonde hair, seemed to be about twenty-five or thereabouts, fairly muscular arms and a healthy outdoorsy look. She wondered if he was a gardener or perhaps someone's apprentice. Turning the page, she found the answer almost immediately. The same young man sat on one of Mark's heavy stools in the basement lab. He was scrutinizing a glass tube filled with a light-colored liquid with an intensely serious gaze on his expressive face. Surprisingly enough, Mark was in the same frame, also staring at the glass with one of the bemused expressions that she had grown to recognize as barely veiled annoyance, but something was not quite right about him. She leaned closer and then drew in a sharp breath. His hair! It was cut fairly short, over his ears and at the neckline with only an inch or two left on the top. She covered her mouth and almost laughed. He looked the same, but not, with the oddly cropped, black locks, greased straight back in what was surely the fashion of the day. The haircut gave him a severe look, like a banker perhaps or a gumshoe detective from an old paperback novel. All he needed was a trenchcoat and a slouch hat. The young man wore a crumpled white dress shirt with the starched sleeves rolled back twice. Mark, as usual, wore his ever-present black, but the cut was Western with white piping on the yoke and around the pocket flaps. The one cuff exposed had white pearl snaps. A cowboy shirt? Tom Mix era no less. He never failed to surprise her! The picture on the facing page showed Simon again with the unidentified fellow. This time dressed in what appeared to be black and white plaid shirts, waders and straw sunhats. They carried an amazing array of fishing equipment slung across their

shoulders and posed, solemn-faced for the camera. Fishing. Serious business, it seemed. Who was taking the picture?

Merry held the picturebook up to the light and studied a fine mark that, at first appeared to be a defect in the surface of the print. A series of fine lines marred the otherwise perfect shot. Closer examination revealed the defect to be strands of hair, possibly blown across the lens from the head of the photographer. Long hair, not black or blonde. Who?

The next page made her frown in earnest. A young girl dressed in a flowered dress that probably reached mid-calf sat on a large boulder. She had a wicker basket in her lap, filled with wild flowers. She held a wide-brimmed, straw hat on her head with one hand and looked off into the distance, showing only her profile. She had a short, up-turned nose, full lips and long, probably red, hair spilling from beneath the hat. Her feet were bare, crossed at the ankles. Her expression was serene, almost dreamy. No more than fifteen or sixteen at the time the picture was taken, she was beautiful. Who was she and again, who took the picture?

Merry jumped and covered the picture with one hand, when Mark Andrew knocked on her door. She was not ready for him and knew he would be angry if he found her "digging in the cemetery", as he liked to call her questions about his life before she knew him. Especially when the "grave" contained a mysterious female. She was under no illusions that Mark's vow of celibacy was about as sincere as the rest of his Brothers' vows. They all had ghosts in their attics and skeletons in their closets. When she did not come to the door immediately, he opened the door, pushing it with one finger cautiously. He stood in the hall looking at her. She got up quickly, shoving the album halfway under her pillow on the bed as she went, while brushing back her hair in an exaggerated fashion to hide her motions. Her ploy was in vain as his deep blue eyes focused on the item in question. He said nothing as she went to pick up the censer from the floor.

"Come in," she told him and sniffed. She hadn't realized that she had been crying. Why was she crying? For his lost past? Why? Because his life must have been filled with sadness at every turn? It was silly.

"Merry?" Mark said her name somewhat hesitantly and then took her arm and turned her around. "Have you been crying?"

"No," she lied.

"No lies." He shook his finger in her face. "Did Simon upset you? Lucio?"

"No. No, I'm sorry." She turned away and began to fill the censer with more of the incense. "I didn't realize that I was crying. This is very… difficult work, Mark. I never realized..." She laid down the canister and sat down on the bed again. Exhausted. How could she go on? She was a complete failure!

"I can see that," he said sternly, but let go of her when she pulled away. He wanted to hold her and kiss her and comfort her and... "Perhaps we should find another way. I don't like this at all. Are you sure someone didn't hurt your feelings? I can remedy that. Tell me what happened."

"No. It was not like that. Yes, you could probably make me forget all about it, but we can't. Not yet," she told him and then closed her eyes as she felt him sit on her bed and heard him drag the old photo album from under the pillow. "Nothing like that. It's all right. I'm fine. Really."

"You don't look fine," he said, but his tone was decidedly different. Less sympathetic.

"Gee, thanks," she said, opened her eyes and smiled ruefully at him from the mirror, but he wasn't looking at her. He looking in the album, flipping the old pages almost angrily. "Are you ready for this?" The question sounded idiotic. How could he be ready for this? He had no idea what was coming and now he was already upset about the photo album.

"Not really. Is this why you were crying?" he asked and then met her gaze in the mirror. She looked away from his eyes.

"What?" she asked.

"These photographs," he said.

Merry sighed. "I don't know. I don't think so. They look… they look like you might have been having… they look like…"

"What? What do they look like, Meredith? That I might have had a life before you?"

"I know you don't like me asking questions, Mark," she said. "But I want to know you… about you. I hardly know anything about you. I want to know everything. What you like. What you used to be like before I knew you. What you want. What you need."

"That's silly. Why? Can't you accept me as I am… as I accept you?"

"No! You don't understand," she said and turned to face him, frowning. "I accept you, Mark. I love you the way you are. In fact, I think

I love you too much and if I knew more about you, perhaps I could think of you as…"

"As what?" he asked when she faltered and some of the light went out of his eyes.

"As… more like a normal man," she blurted.

"Normal? You think I'm abnormal?" he asked and seemed genuinely surprised and blinked his eyes in puzzlement.

"No! That's the wrong word," she said and bit her lower lip. "You're normal enough. I mean humanly normal in every respect except you… well you seem more than human somehow."

"Ahhh," he said and smiled slightly. "You think of me as a god? Or maybe a demon? Something supernatural?"

"You're making fun of me," she muttered and felt the tears returning.

"No I'm not," he said and his tone changed again. "I just don't understand. Must be woman thing."

"A woman thing?" The tears retreated. "That's what I'm talking about. You are outside of me. Separated by a thousand years. I'll never keep up and I'll never know what makes you tick. For instance, how can you forgive me for what I did to you?"

"Who said I forgave you?" he asked.

"Mark! See! You are making fun of me. This is serious. It's important to me."

"OK. What do you want to know, Meredith?"

"For real? You'll answer my questions this time?"

"Sure. Why not? Remember this, however; you may not like the answers."

"I'll risk it."

"En garde."

She took the album from his hands and opened the book to the tractor picture.

"Who took this?"

"I did."

"Who is this young fellow here on the steps?"

"Jeremiah Kincaid. He was my apprentice at the time."

"What time was that?"

"Oh, well, let's see. Twentieth century."

"I can see that!"

"Late thirties."

"Before the war?"

"Before I was called up to serve. Aye."

"What happened to him?"

"Meredith, what happens to all of them? He died."

"How?"

"The war. France."

"I'm sorry."

"Me, too."

She flipped the page to the picture of the girl and went for the throat.

"And this girl. Who is she?"

"Her name was Sarah. She was the daughter of a minor government official in southern France."

"During the war?"

"No, not the big wars. I believe your Teddy Roosevelt was fighting with Morocco at the time."

"Oh, that. Wasn't much of a war."

"But it got everyone's attention," he countered. "I received an excruciating assignment in Spain for about six months because of it."

"What kind of assignment?"

"The worst kind… waiting, watching, drinking, thinking."

"So what happened?"

"Nothing. I came home."

"So this picture is older than the rest?"

"Yes. And yes, I took the picture."

"Why? How did you know her?"

"I didn't know her. I knew her mother and she asked me take a portrait of her daughter. There weren't that many cameras in town. Actually, I was posing as a photographer at the time on an intel assignment."

"Really? Her mother, eh?"

"They didn't have much money. Her husband was a scoundrel. He used to beat her."

"So she sought comfort from you?"

"I gave her money to get away," he shrugged.

"Did she? Go, I mean."

"No." Mark grimaced looked away from her as if the memory pained him.

"I see."

"Do you?"

"I think so."

"He killed her before she could leave him. A small tragedy lost to history. Does it matter?"

"What happened to her? The girl, I mean."

"She died. Complications of childbirth, I believe. She was married to one of the soldiers in Paris at the time. So much wasted."

"You mean one of our soldiers?"

"Yes."

"How did that happen? Did you arrange that?"

"No. Yes."

"She was beautiful."

"She was very young."

"So you stole her away from her savage father and saved her. Did you… were you attracted to her?"

"She had a crush on me I believe is what they call it now."

"Of course she did." Merry had to smile.

"Anything else?" he asked.

"Your hair…" she said, deciding from his tone that it was time to change the subject. "Here in the lab with Jeremiah."

"Oh that," he laughed and squinted at the picture. "Simon's idea. He thought it made me look more in fashion."

"So you didn't like it," she asked.

"No. I think it made me look like an American."

"So that's not good?"

"No. Not to me."

"You don't like Americans?"

"Not in general."

"You see. I didn't know that. At least you're honest."

"I try. In answer to the question you didn't ask. The answer is yes. But no, not my child. No!"

Merry sighed again. It was time to begin the ritual. She nodded slowly, got up and put a match to the small block of incense in the censor. The corner glowed red and she was reminded of the terrible glowing red

eyes of the evil fairies and the red serpent. She waved one hand over the incense to get it started smoking and then closed the ornate lid on the brass bowl.

"One more question," she said quickly before the mood was lost.

"Yes?"

"Why don't you like talking about the past?"

"You should know by now, but I'll tell you and I want you to give this a bit of thought while you are in a meditation state and you will see for yourself. There is power in words, Meredith. Creative power. How many of your incantations include the word fiat? What do you think that means?"

"Finish?" she asked.

"Finis is finish. Fiat is usually used in connection with the word creative. The Creative Fiat. The Creative Word. The Word. The Word of God. Don't you know that God spoke the universe into creation? There is power in words, Merry. Great and infinite power. Every time you say something, you are in the act of creation. First you think it and then you create it by speaking it, setting things into motion. When I speak of the past, I put things in motion by bringing them up again and giving them new life. When I speak of people dead and gone, I put their essence back into the wind, so to speak. It is a dangerous business, talking too much. That's why you should think long and hard before you speak and you of all people know that I hate thinking. When you think and speak and then cause a thing to be, then you are using the same power that God uses to eternally create the Universe and everything in it. Have you never heard of the power of life and death being in the tongue? The entire Universe is made of vibrational energies. In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. The same was in the beginning with God. All things were made by him; and without him was not any thing made that was made. In him was life; and the life was the light of men. You and I are representatives of God on earth and we possess a measure of His power. Do you understand what I'm telling you?"

"I think so," she said and nodded her head. He'd not spoken to her in this manner, teacher to student since he had tutored her on what it meant to be a member of the Order. It made her feel small and stupid and at the same time, wonderful. She could have listened to him forever, but time was wearing on.

"Ye'd best know so, Lassie," he said ominously though he smiled. "Think on it. You'll see the truth of it."

"Oll roighty then, Laddie," she laughed and felt almost renewed. "Get thee down on thy knees, boy. It's time to go to work."

Mark made a face in response to her fake accent and dragged a pillow down to the floor. No need to get sore knees. Merry would not be flogging him with a whip for his irreverence.

When he was comfortable, she passed the incense in front of his face, but he kept his eyes on her face, unnerving her with his steady, clear gaze. His expression was almost unreadable, but she felt he was trying to gauge what effect the information she had learned might have on her. Perhaps, she thought, if the impression proved favorable, he might be more willing to shell out a few bits of trivia now and again. Determined to remain positive and upbeat, she kept her face neutral with just the hint of a smile on her lips. The ceremony was serious business and she often had trouble keeping her thoughts trained on the task at hand to the exclusion of all else.

She placed her hand on his head and he blinked.

"Bow your head, Brother. Close your eyes," she said and he did what she asked, though unlike Simon and Lucio who had clenched their eyes shut as if expecting a beating, Mark's face was relaxed and serene as if he expected a kiss or… the blessings of a priest or an angel. His calm presence emanated from him and enveloped her within it, giving her comfort, easing her fears. She suddenly wanted to dispense with the ceremony, take him in her arms and simply lie with him on the floor forever and ever and... She bent to look at his face and he opened his eyes, startling her.

"Oh," he said, somewhat surprised by her nearness, but closed his eyes when she straightened up. "Sorry."

"No problem," she said and drew a deep breath before beginning the opening prayer.

Mark Andrew obeyed her when she told him to repeat her words with the same calmness expressed in his demeanor. He made the confession the same way Simon had done, repeating the words in a low voice, rapidly without a single hitch, falter or protest. He remained perfectly still as she walked around him with the incense three times and then lifted his chin.

"Open your eyes, Brother."

He looked up at her and smiled when she handed him the censer. He held the brass bowl with reverence as if it were a holy relic and his expression had changed once again to something akin to respect, almost adoration. But whether he was thinking of her or the God to whom they were praying, there was no way of knowing. Of all people, no matter his vocation, Mark Andrew had to have at least one, if not a dozen angels watching over him.

The closing prayer followed without a fault.

"That's it?" he asked after saying the last Amen.

Merry took the censer to the dresser and then stood watching him in fascination as he climbed to his feet and brushed at his knees. It was obvious that Mark Andrew had very few sins for which he had not atoned.

"Are you all right? You really need to get some rest. Here."

He took her arm and led her to the bed, pulled back the covers and tucked her in under the counterpane before she could protest. He fluffed her pillow, brushed it off and placed it behind her head.

"There. Now, before you make me leave, I want to talk to you about something," he said, taking a seat on the side of the bed.

"What?" she asked.

"About al Hafiz …" He held up one hand when she reacted negatively to the name and started to come out of the bed. "No! Stay right there now. I'm not angry. I need to ask you something."

"All right," she said tiredly and collapsed back on the pillows, her formerly light mood destroyed. She was in his debt.

"Can you… is it possible…" he hesitated. He didn't know any way to ask her about her powers. "Do you think you can perhaps shield us… protect us from his spells and his sorcery?"

"What do you mean?" she asked and brows knit together.

"I mean, could you use your powers, your Mystery, to block him from casting his spells on us? Or at least from casting spells on you?" he asked.

"I could," she nodded, relieved at the content of his question. "But I don't know if it would be proper without provocation."

"I believe we have been sufficiently provoked. I believe that he is using his magick to interject my dreams and my memories into John Paul's mind and I also believe that he is attempting to control our actions and manipulate us for his own sadistic pleasure."

"He knows who I am. He has always known who I am and that is what makes me so very angry, Merry. I had him three times in my sight," he thumped his chest in disgust. "And I could not withstand his power. I let him beat me! He murdered my brother and he turned me into a monster and he did it solely for his entertainment. There was no other reason I can see. Now he has put you in danger and he has caused Simon a great deal of grief. Simon will never be the same man we all knew and loved. And it is because of al Hafiz's machinations. He is trying to destroy the Order from within and he lusts after you and your Mystery. He would have both. If we cannot unite our purpose to stop him, he will be victorious. He will defeat us. I would rather see you dead than with him. I have already told Simon this and he is in agreement with me. He has agreed that if I cannot stop the magician and it appears that we are defeated, he will kill you before he lets him take you. In the logical course of history, all things must fall and rise. If we are to fall, then we should at least make it difficult for our enemies. If we must take our secrets to the grave, then so be it. God will not allow his plan to be diverted, believe that. If our deaths are part of the plan, then we will suffer no more for it. I want your promise that if it comes to it, you will know what to do and you will do it. You know of Masada? You know the story?"

She nodded.

"The Order has a contingency plan that is designed after Masada," he continued. "You probably didn't know."

"Is that the M-urgency Plan?" she asked and her eyes widened with sudden realization. "I thought it was something de Bleu had come up with."

"Silly, isn't it? Aye. Montague started calling it that back in the fifties."

"I have a copy of it somewhere in the closet." she whispered. "It's in the library." Her eyes darted to the heavy armoire that she called a closet. "I was supposed to read it and destroy it. But you have a copy in your library. Why did I have to destroy mine?"

"No," he said and smiled at her alarm. "It's only the cover. I just liked the title. I think it has medical journals in it. But you shouldn't keep it. In fact, I'm surprised they let you have a copy of it." He got up and opened the armoire. "Where is it?"

"In the file box, there. On the top shelf," she said and watched as he took down the heavy box. She watched with a sinking feeling as he looked through the numerous documents inside the expandable, fire-resistant storage box.

"Ahhh," he said and pulled out a small folder. Black with gold lettering on the front. "So you never read it?"

"I'm afraid I didn't," she admitted. "I was so busy and there was so much to learn and do…"

Mark set the box on the dresser and resumed his seat beside her. When he opened the folder, he found only five blank pages.

"You see," he said and tossed the folder on the floor. "Time constraints, Merry. Monty is quite the witty fellow."

"What happened to it?" she asked, even more alarmed. "Am I in trouble?"

"Not necessarily, but you should have read it before it faded," he said. "I'm sure it would have been… enlightening."

"So it was meant to fade?" she asked.

"Of course. It was probably gone entirely an hour or two after you received it. Maybe less. The man is persnickety about his shedules and blooming tea times. He probably thought you would sit down in the hall outside his door and read it before proceeding any further."

"I'm sorry."

"Don't fret about it," he said and pushed her back on the pillow. "I'll tell you about it some other time. Now get some rest."

"So we are expected to commit murder/suicide in the event of an emergency?" she asked in a small voice unable to resist.

"It's not like that, Merry," he said. "I'll tell you all about it when our little business is finished here and your daughter is back in your arms. You'll feel better about everything then. I promise. But yes, I did speak with Simon about the possibility of him being the one to carry out the deed if I'm not around. We have to be… what is it they call it these days?… Pro-active. It will be especially difficult where Simon is concerned. He's in love with you, by the by."

Merry swallowed hard. So Mark Andrew knew this! She had underestimated him again. She made no effort to respond.

"Yes, I know it's hard to believe, but it's true," Mark said, drew a deep breath and sighed. "I couldn't believe it, at first, myself, but it's easy

enough to see now. I'm not worried about Simon. He will do what he has to do. He is an honorable man and he is my Brother and my priest and my friend. I trust him completely because he is nothing like your Brother Lucio. There is no competition between us. In fact, I feel rather badly for him. It is terrible for him to have to suffer this after such a… an innocent life. To have suffered for so long from one thing and now to suffer from another thing. Doesn't seem fair."

"I don't think he was suffering the one thing so much as you might think," Merry said and looked up at the ceiling. "I believe… I sincerely believe, that he was probably better off before. I think I may have done him a terrible disservice, but really, Mark, you don't think that Simon is really innocent, do you? I mean he's told me some interesting tales."

"Perhaps innocent is not the right word for him, but then, perhaps that is a selfish thought, Sister. You did nothing without God's approval. We would have kept him the way he was for our own purposes and apparently, God had other plans."

Merry nodded. She could not argue God's plans with Mark Andrew. She had no idea what God's plan was and naturally, she had no idea what Mark's plans might be and if they agreed with God's or were completely contrary to God's. She knew enough about him to know that he would tell her to do one thing, while he would do the exact opposite.

"Now I don't want you to say a word about this to him, do you hear me?" he asked and she nodded again. "It will be our secret and his. Let him be. I'm sure he'll get over it in time. Just don't encourage him for pity's sake, lass. He might be over seven hundred years old, but he's still a young fellow inside. Sometimes he gets on my nerves with his childishness. His experience with women is sorely lacking… I think…" he added and then frowned.

"I surely won't encourage him and I'll consider what you've said about al Hafiz," she said. She didn't want to talk about Simon any more. She would do much more than consider the problem with al Hafiz. The man was making her very angry. He was attacking everything she held dear. Her son, John Paul. Mark Andrew. Her Brother, Simon. Herself. And her way of life. Who knew what else he was doing?

"Now, give me a kiss goodnight," Mark said suddenly, bringing her back to reality.

"Mark Andrew," she warned and withdrew her hand from his.

"No, I'm serious. Just a kiss goodnight." He leaned toward her and she leaned away from him. He held up one hand in protest. "No. I'm sorry. You can't make me stay, Merry. I won't have you messing up your magick. Just one kiss is all I'll give and then I'll be on my way. I believe Paddy has something interesting for my diversion."

Merry smiled and then leaned forward to kiss him lightly on the lips. He took her shoulders and kissed her again much less lightly.

"That was two!" she said when he let go of her.

"It was not! It was one. One for you. One for me," he said and stood up. "Now, don't make a scene! I have to go. I cannot stay here with you, Meredith. The Master Magician prohibits such behavior. I am his… her servant and her slave."

She threw one of the pillows at him as he retreated, bowing and scraping backwards toward the door. He ducked and then let himself out into the hall.

Merry sat in the bed in the growing darkness while the candles went out one by one, listening to the rain blow against the windows. Seeing Mark in such a rare mood lifted her spirits again in spite of the seriousness of their conversation prior to. Perhaps she should reconsider the order in which tomorrow night's ritual might proceed. Perhaps she should take Lucio first and get it over with and then Simon and then Mark. That way, she would have time to recuperate from the volatile Italian before they went to the circle. But Simon would likely be most difficult and Mark might not be as receptive as he had been tonight. Lucio might not mind too much, but… it was terrible. Which one? Perhaps she should just draw a name from a hat. Or better yet, she would consult the astronomy and see what the morrow had in store for them.

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Al Sajek al Hafiz looked up thoughtfully from his seat in front of his scrying dish. He should have done this long ago. He kicked himself mentally for not having researched the priest more thoroughly. So Simon d'Ornan, the venerable Simon of Grenoble, was planning to marry. And why? Because he knew he could not have Semiramis. Of course. The

honorable Templar Healer would never try to steal another man's wife. He would suffer his unrequited love in silence. Al Hafiz laughed softly.

And the child? Orri they called her. Oriel. The golden one. Oh, yes. She was special. Simon would take her in a moment if the opportunity presented itself. And the other priest's child. Mark Ramsay's dubious grandson. Very special indeed. And the dark Knight had taken him under his wing already. Now the Apocalyptic Knight had two children to see after. Entanglements. Entanglements. Chaos and confusion. Their prophet's resolve was weakening. Ah, the company of women is a dangerous thing. Surely the Grand Master's Knights should have kept to the old ways. The ways with which they were familiar. Now there were many chinks in their armor. But what was Semiramis up to? He was still unable to discern this ritual, this ceremony she was planning. Her magick was unknown to him. What she had done in the underworld had been child's play compared to what she was undertaking now. What power! What majesty! They would make a sublime couple.

The magician returned his attention to the bowl and looked in on the priest again. He saw him sitting in front of the computer screen in Ramsay's library. How cluttered the man's home was. Full of objects of no value. He abhorred these Occidental customs of filling the house with objects. His home was clean and airy. Oriental. Only the necessities for comfort were present. Cushions to sit on or recline, a few tables for tastefully arranged fruit or flower bowels. No desk. No decorations other than the comforting designs worked into the elaborate tiles on the walls and the scrollwork on the tall columns. A nice bed and a footstool or two. But his thoughts were wandering to Semiramis again. He looked into the bowl. The priest had received a cryptic message from another priest in Tel-Aviv. The object had been found. What object? He sat up straighter. The cup? But he had the cup! He had taken it from the chapel in Scotland. It sat on the pedestal at the foot of his bed. What cup? Had they found another cup like the one he had taken from the prophet? Or was this something else? He watched as the priest read the message and then erased it from his electronic mail. The priest sent off a brief message thanking his friend for the information.

The magician let this image fade and looked in on Semiramis. She was sleeping peacefully now in her bed… alone. Very good. Alone. He liked that. He shifted his attention to the other Knight's bedroom. The big

Knight, the slow one. He was also in his bedchamber, but he was not asleep, he was praying to his god. Asking him for guidance. Something about stones or gems. Was this all the man ever thought about? Stones and knocking balls about in the grass?

He shifted once more and could almost see the other Knight. The one he admired. The Knight of the Golden Eagle, but he was enveloped in some kind of haze now. The image was very blurry and he was engaged in some sort of conversation, but he could not make out the words. There was magick at work here as well. Another presence he could not pinpoint was in the room with the Knight and the Knight was drinking heavily. He could not clear the image. Whoever he was with seemed ephemeral somehow as if only a ghost. Scrying was very taxing. The sorcerer drew back from the bowl and rubbed the bridge of his nose. It had been much easier when he'd had both his eyes. He scowled at the thought of Ramsay's golden blade; the cause of his current disability. He should have killed him long ago in Jerusalem rather than toying with him. Ramsay had fallen far since their first encounters. The man was only a shade of his former self. Killing him next time would be more expedient and he would be done with it. He glanced once more in the scrying bowl and saw the Knight of Death in his own room, sleeping soundly, curled around the cursed golden sword. What manner of man slept with such a wicked weapon? What was he so afraid of? Certainly, it was not his fear of rats that made him sleep with a weapon of such power. There were no rats in Ramsay's home. Perhaps he should send a few, but not today. He was tired. He had been up all day, preparing his new amulet of Nodens. If the prophet were invoking Nodens, he would also need to do the same to keep the balance tipped in his favor.

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"Lucky, me boy," Paddy paced the floor in front of the half-drunken Knight. "Ye're takin' this much too 'ard. If I'd known wot was goin' t' happen, I cud have 'elped ye out a bit. I know nothin' o' yer god thot ye pray to, but I do know thot 'e's powerful and 'e's merciful and forgivin'. If ye made yer confession with a pure 'eart, then 'e's forgiven ye. Whair I come from 'e's known as th' Great Creator, but wee folks dunna pray to

’im. ’e’s too powerful fer us. ’e gave us th’ lesser gods t’ see aftar us and ’e sees aftar them. We wudna want to insult ’im by pesterin’ ’im with our petty grievances. ’e is th’ god of men and of angels. ’e’s lookin’ out fer ye now, I’ll wager.”

“I never knew that I was such a sinner, Paddy,” Lucio said miserably and turned up the bottle to finish it off. “I always thought that my confessions were made with a pure heart, but now I know that it wasn’t so. This was the first real confession I ever made and I feel terrible.”

“But ye shud feel bettar, me boy.” Paddy stopped to puff on his pipe and looked at the Italian closely. “Ye’ve learned a great deal in a short toime. Here, ye go. Let me give ye somethin’. A good luck piece.” He reached in his pocket to pull out one of the black stones. “Take this now and put it in yer pocket.”

Lucio took the rock from him and did not look at it. He simply put it in his pocket.

“Perchance… do you have another pipe, my friend?” Lucio asked and squinted at him through bleary eyes.

“O’ carse,” Paddy said and reached into one of his many pockets. He pulled a short, stubby pipe made of white chalk, carved with the head of an eagle. Lucio watched in fascination as he tamped the bowl full of bluish green tobacco. “’ere ye go, lad.”

Lucio took the pipe, clamped it between his teeth and puffed while Paddy lit it for him. The smoke tasted wonderful and went down easy. He nodded his thanks.

“And here’s me advoice,” the clurichaun continued. “Go on up t’ bed and before ye go t’ sleep, just say one ’o yur prayers ye used to say and this toime, put yer heart into it. Ye’ll sleep a bit bettar, I’ll fancy. Ye ’ave one more day and then ye can get on with yer loife.”

“Then you’re saying I will be able to find Lucia?” The Knight perked up a bit. The smoke seemed to clear his head somewhat.

“Oh, ye’ll foind her oll right,” Paddy nodded. “But ye’ll have some more decisions to make then. And remember, Lucky, not evra thing is as it seems. Finish yer pipe and go on up t’ bed. It’s verra late. Olmost toime fur th’ cock t’ crow.”

Lucio got up reluctantly from Mark Andrew’s fancy green velvet sofa and started for the door, taking the fanciful pipe with him.

“Do you know who Obakoso is?” He glanced back at the clurichaun.

“Obakoso? I believe he’s also known as Chango. Why?” Paddy said and his expression changed to one of real concern. “A foreigner.”

“Who is he?” Lucio paused at the door.

“’e’s one o’ th’ lesser gods, but not fur th’ wee folk. Why do ye ask?”

“I dreamed about him,” Lucio shrugged. “I must be losing my mind.”

“Thot’s a possibility,” Paddy laughed and Lucio smiled at him wanly. “Oh, by th’ way. Be expectin’ a coll tomorrow from th’ Grand Master. ’e’s a bit concerned aboot ye. And be expectin’ a noice surprise on Saturday.”

“How do you know all this?” Lucio asked him doubtfully.

“Oh, Paddy knows.” The clurichaun winked at him and puffed on his own pipe. “It’s oll in th’ stars, my boy.”

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“Grandmama!” Merry looked up at the sound of her grandson’s voice as he ran toward her across the meadow. “I found them! I have them!”

She got up from the rocking chair and laid aside the book she was reading. She met the boy at the gate and unlatched the hook to let him inside with the bundle he hugged close to him and then followed him back to the porch to see what he had found.

Jozsef placed the lumpy cloth on the porch and opened it up to reveal a pile of colorful rocks.

“Oh, those are really nice, Jozsef!” Merry sat down on the steps and began to pick up the rocks one at a time to examine them more carefully. “Do you think these are the ones you’ve been looking for?”

“Oh, yes, I think so.” The boy sat down on the steps. He was dirty and smudged with dark stains on his face, but his bright blue eyes were sparkling as he picked out a snowy white stone to hold it up to the sunshine. “These are the magickal ones.”

“How do you know?” she asked as she brushed some of the dirt and grass from his hair.

“Because...” he answered vaguely.

Michele came out of the house and sat down beside them on the steps.

“These are the rocks you’ve been looking for, Jozsef?” Michele asked him and picked up one of the stones.

"Yes, mama," Jozsef nodded to her. "I want to show papa."

"He's out back building a birdhouse," Michele said and smiled down at the boy and brushed more of the grass and dirt from his hair.

"A real birdhouse?"

She nodded.

Jozsef gathered up his treasures and tramped up the steps.

"He looks so much like John Paul," Merry commented when he was gone.

"And he acts like him too, except for his chatter." Michele nodded and then looked up at the mulberry tree where the birds were fighting over the berries. "Do you think we could make some mulberry wine?"

"I'm sure you could. I don't know the recipe," Merry shrugged. She loved it here in the meadow. It was so peaceful and quiet.

They were startled by the sound of horse's hooves on the turf and looked up to see a short fellow dressed in black riding up to the gate. He turned the great black stallion about in a tight circle and looked at them from under his black hood.

"Give me back my treasure, Chevaliere!" he shouted at them in a deep voice. Too deep for one so small. "I earned it fair n' square!"

"What are you talking about?" Merry stood up and frowned at the man.

"I'm talkin' aboot me ring!" The dwarf turned the horse again as it pawed at the ground in front of the gate.

"I don't have your ring!" Merry told him irritably and looked down at her hand. She wore the diamond wedding band that Lucio had given her. Where was Mark Andrew's ring? She was sure she had put it on.

"Aye! Ye do 'ave it! 'e gave it you when ye wair wed to 'im! Th' curse is upon ye! T' take anoother mon's property is a crime here and elsewhair. Gi' me back me ring!"

Merry started down the steps and Michele caught her arm.

"Don't do it, Merry!" Michele whispered to her urgently. "Don't take off the ring."

Merry looked back at her daughter-in-law and then up at the dwarf on the horse.

"Then so be it!" The dwarf shouted at her, clearly angry. He would not get down off the horse. The magick was too great here. "I'll be back t' collect me property!" With that last declaration, he reined the horse around

and galloped away across the meadow. The sound of the horse's hooves faded into the distance.

Merry opened her eyes just as a great clap of thunder rolled across the meadows around Mark Andrew's home. She got out bed quickly and turned on the lamp. Mark Andrew's ring sparkled on her finger. She went to the window and looked out across the meadow as the lightning strikes lit up the scene in surreal light. Her heart caught in her throat as she thought she saw the fleeting shape of a dark horse galloping across the meadow behind the house. She flung open the window and leaned out into the rain. It was cold and soaked her immediately.

"Wait!" she shouted in vain. "Come back!"

But the horse, if it had been real, had disappeared into the blowing storm. She closed the window and locked it before going to the dresser to find the little wooden box. The ring Lucio had given her lay in the box, sparkling in the light of the lamp.

'He gave it to you when you were wed to him.' Of course, he did. But why would this little dark fellow say it was his ring? Had it been only a dream? And why had she been at the cottage in the underworld again with Michele? And Jozsef? Jozsef? The boy had called John Paul 'papa'. Did that mean that Michele and John Paul were finally going to have a baby? It could have meant many things and it could have been just her tired mind trying to sort things out. She went to the bathroom and changed out of the wet gown and got back into bed.

Chapter Twelve of Seventeen
to perceive the words of understanding

Louis Champlain beat on Lucio's door again. It was after eight o'clock in the morning and the Knight of the Golden Eagle was still in bed! Louis was appalled. Louis was an early riser and thought everyone else should be as well.

Lucio finally opened the door, wearing only his pants and a terrible grimace.

"Whatever is it, Brother? Earthquake? Tidal wave?" Lucio grumbled and Louis thrust the telephone at him.

"Even more formidable, Brother," Louis matched his tone. "The Grand Master wishes to speak to you."

"Oh, excuse me." Lucio's grimace was replaced by sheepish smile as he took the phone and closed the door in Louis' face.

"Your Grace?" Lucio tried to sound as if he had been awake longer.

"Brother," the Grand Master sounded as if he was just next-door. "You are having difficulties?"

"No, your Grace. Everything is fine here," Lucio lied and crossed himself immediately. "It was just a late night. The rituals and such."

"I see," the Grand Master's voice was doubtful. "I want to see you before you go off in search of the child. As soon as the matter in Scotland is cleared up, I want you to come to Italy. I have urgent business to discuss with you. Grave matters, as it were and I need your undivided attention. You have been neglecting your duties, Golden Eagle. I realize that we have been through many trials and tribulations of late, but you must get back on track. The Ritter has been filling in for you, but he has his own agenda and he needs to concentrate on his work."

"Yes, your Grace." Another complication. Another delay. Lucia would be a hundred years old before he found her.

"I have had a letter from the Vatican concerning your annulment. It has been granted and will be only a matter of paperwork. As for the secular courts, you will have to take care of that end… you or Sister Meredith. I believe it only takes one of you for that."

"Yes, your Grace." Lucio did not want more depressing news. Well, at least it would be over soon.

"Pass this news on to Sister Meredith. Tell her also that I will grant custody of the girl to you and the boy will remain with her. There will be visiting rights of course. But we will work that out later on. Also I will require you to live in Italy. In Naples, if you like, but no further. Is that clear?"

"Yes, your Grace." Naples was not a bad place. Well, some of it was not so bad. There were some very good private schools for girls and…

"And Brother?" The Master's tone changed.

"Yes, Sir?"

"I am considering expanding your areas of responsibility. It will require your presence at the Villa more so than you have seen fit to grace us with in the past. There are adjustments to be made with the passing of Sir Philip and we must get on with our business. I will discuss this more in detail with you when you come here." This was more bad news. More responsibility?

"Have you decided on a replacement for the Seneschal then?" Lucio asked him though he was not really interested. It made little difference to him. One Brother was just as good as another as far as he was concerned.

"I have and I've chosen some candidates for new apprenticeships for Brother Ramsay and Sister Meredith and Simon, as well," he told him. "How is your apprentice, Stephano?"

"He is well, your Grace. Still in fine form as a matter of fact," Lucio perked up. Surely it was not time to replace Stephano. He tried to think how old Stephano might be now and was suddenly ashamed to think that he didn't really know.

"Good, good. You should contact him and have him meet you here at the Villa. I would speak with him as well."

"Yes, your Grace." Lucio yawned and tried to stifle it unsuccessfully.

"Go with God, Brother."

"And you, Sir."

Lucio looked down at the phone. The Master had not requested Mark Andrew's presence? This did not bode well. He dreaded facing the man with all he had on his mind. And he did not want to take on more responsibilities. Not now. He needed to get his life on track. Get his daughter back. Get the divorce settled and then, maybe, he would feel more

like his old self again. He hurried to his dresser and searched for his wallet to find the number in Egypt where he could find his apprentice. He couldn't remember the last time he had spoken to him and his heart fell as the phone rang endlessly on the other end with no answer. Stephano could have been dead for all he knew! He would keep trying later on.

God would never forgive him.

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The Grand Master punched the button on the cordless phone and looked about the office of his former Seneschal, Philip Cambrique. Very little had changed here. De Bleu had added a few personal touches including a day/date calendar with pictures of dogs on it and a desk clock shaped like the Eiffel tower. A whole assortment of colored pens and hi-liters in a little ceramic dish shaped like a fish added a splash of color to the otherwise monotone furnishings. The things were incongruous in Philip's office and d'Brouchart was upset at first to see them and had repressed the urge to throw them in the trash. It would not have been the right thing to do. Surely the next Seneschal who would occupy this office would add his own personality to the deep mahogany furniture and luxuriously marble-paneled walls. Sir Philip had had all the latest electronic appliances: computer, printer, fax, answering machine, filing system, copier, as well as, a supply of cell phones and portable radios for everyone who wished to check one out, but he had them tastefully arranged without clutter and without detracting from the historic quality of the room. Sir Philip's presence was everywhere here and this was the first time the Grand Master had ventured into the room since returning to Italy. He replaced the black cordless phone in its cradle and leaned forward, propping his elbows on the desk pad, cupping his chin in his clasped hands as tears ran down his cheeks. It would not do for the boys to catch him crying. There was his image to live up to.

He felt he had finally made his decision concerning Sir Philip's replacement and he hoped that he was making the right choice. Things had changed so drastically in such a short period. At least he had been resting fairly well of late and had not been plagued by nightmares in a goodly while. Al Hafiz had not left his home in the Punjab and that was good.

Perhaps they would be able to take care of some of the more pressing business at hand before having to face him again. D'Brouchart was convinced that the man would be back for Sister Meredith at some point and he felt sure that the magician would be concentrating his powers on locating the Ark of the Covenant at the same time.

The Grand Master squinted at the pattern in the marble on the wall in front of the desk. It reminded him of the great red serpent he had slain in Scotland. A red dragon! The dragon had been of an oriental design… design. Dragons were not natural phenomenon. They had never been natural phenomenon. Dragons were created. The tales of dragon's lairs with eggs and young were simply tales. Dragons were the products of men's minds. He silently thanked God that few men on earth today possessed the knowledge and the fortitude to accomplish such a feat.

His thoughts returned to Sister Meredith and her experiment. If she succeeded, she would learn the whereabouts of the child, Lucia Simone. If she succeeded, it would be the first time in uncounted ages that the Wisdom of Solomon had been used to perform such a task. If she succeeded, he would have another task for her. But he knew the strain of conducting these 'experiments' as they were called. Sister Meredith would be learning by doing. She would soon see why the Wisdom of Solomon was something one did not indulge lightly. But it should be worthwhile to find the child and give his lady Knight a bit of OJT. They needed the child to be returned to the fold. What would all the prophecies come to if they lost one of the twins?

He leaned back and looked around the room, trying to imagine what its next occupant would do there. He could see stone statuettes in alabaster and onyx with gold trim and brightly painted papyrus wall hangings covered with colorful hieroglyphics. It might not be so bad. Certainly, the Golden Eagle's Egyptian treasures would not detract from the richness of the room.

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Lucio could not go back to sleep. The Grand Master's phone call had upset him and set him to thinking again about how many kinks and delays

he was suffering concerning his search for his daughter. Now what had he done? The Grand Master was most likely highly perturbed with him. He had gone off into the Abyss with Mark Andrew without permission and it had taken him five years to get back. He had taken the child to Egypt without permission and had lost her. He had made a fool of himself in front of the entire Council in Scotland. He had provoked the Master's newest Knight into attacking him and at a funeral no less! The last he remembered, the Grand Master was still angry with him for getting himself hanged in Ethiopia. Constraint, Golden Eagle, constraint! Have you no understanding of the word?! The Master's words still rang in his ears.

How dare the man be angry with him for being killed?! He had done nothing to deserve the hanging. At least, nothing that severe. But he still had a bone to pick with Edgard d'Brouchart, venerable Master of the Poor Knights of Solomon's Temple. There was the small matter of his Noble father and his mother, the witch. The man still owed him an explanation for not telling him who he was. And now, he no doubt wanted to call him home to Italy just to rag him some more for not keeping up with his news anchor duties. Why didn't the Grand Master just read the damned reports and listen to the news himself? The man didn't even watch television unless there was some monumental occurrence in the news. And he refused to have a phone installed in his quarters. Sir Philip had spent half his life running up and down the fucking sidewalks and corridors of the damned Villa searching for the Master when all the man would have had to do was install a phone or carry a cell phone or at least a beeper or a radio! Oh, well. Edgard d'Brouchart was the Grand Master and there was no use worrying over it. He would just have to go, take his medicine and there was nothing he could do about it. It was God's…. He shook his head.

"Santa Maria," he muttered under his breath.

He glanced hatefully at the clock. He had missed breakfast. Apparently, they had all missed breakfast. The sun was well up now and there would be nothing to eat until after dark. But at least today was the last day. He began to unload his pockets and found the black stone Paddy had given him the night before. Good luck! He needed that. He changed his clothes and replaced the stuff in his pockets along with the stone before wandering downstairs to see what everyone else was doing.

Lucio went dejectedly to the kitchen and fished about in the refrigerator for a bottle of mineral water. He contemplated pouring

chocolate syrup in the water or taking a hit off the little bottle. Hmmm. His empty stomach revolted at the cold water and it threatened to come back up, but he forced it to stay down and drank some more just for fun. He took the bottle down the back hallway in search of company to share his misery. As he was about to start down the cellar stairs in search of his beloved Brother, he heard Merry's voice coming from the laundry room.

"That sounds like a wonderful plan, Michele," Merry was saying. Lucio almost continued on his way and then paused. What plan? He paused at the cellar door and made ready to pretend to be just going down if she came out of the laundry and found him hovering there. Eavesdropping. Was that a sin?

"I think it might be better than leaving altogether," Michele answered Merry. "I don't have anyone in America now and I would be lost in New York after living here for so long."

"I know what you mean," Merry added wistfully. "I often think of Texas and how much I would like to go back, but there's nothing there for me now. I think I'd like to take a vacation there sometime. I went there with Lucio once a few years back and we went out to the old place. It was amazing to see how little the old place had changed though it didn't really look lived in, you know? They've sold off some of the land nearby and built a housing addition and a shopping center just down the road from where I lived. There's probably even more houses and more stores there now, but I still think about it."

"Yeah, I miss the big city life sometimes," Michele laughed. "Not really. The older I get, the less appealing it seems. And then I would have to find a job! At my age, who would hire me and what would I do?"

"I don't think you would have to work, Michele," Merry assured her. "John Paul would never just put you out like that. Even if you did go, you would be well provided for. Money is not something we have to worry about, thank God. We don't need any more problems than we already have."

"What of your… whatever it is you are doing? Is it progressing well?" Michele asked the question and Lucio wanted to hear this answer for sure.

"Well, I hadn't expected so much… how do I say this? So much difficulty? I mean, I thought we would just do the ritual cleansings and prayers and confessions and invocations and all that stuff and then we'd do

the ceremony and get our answer. It is much more involved than I had suspected. I should have known," Merry's voice faded away.

"Is it Uncle Lucio?" Michele asked her after a moment. They were folding clothes apparently. He heard a basket thump on the floor and the dryer door squeak open.

"It's all three of them really," Merry laughed. "They are all so very different and yet, the same."

"Really?" Michele sounded surprised. "They seem awfully different to me. Uncle Simon, of course, doesn't seem to be as… as easy-going as he used to be. But he was always such a pleasure to talk to. He had all the answers it seemed and he always said 'I don't know all ze answers but…' and then he would give you the answer! Just like that." Michele mimicked Simon's voice almost perfectly. Lucio was shocked. Eavesdropping on women was a new experience for him. He would have to add this to his program for future reference. He had never given a thought to what they might say when they were alone. Or when they thought they were alone. "And Uncle Lucio! He was always so full of himself. But even still, I always had the feeling that he was afraid of me. Why, I don't know. But he always made sure he was never alone with me more than a few seconds at a time. Like he thought I was going to attack him or something," Michele continued and Lucio blanched. Was that how he had seemed to her? "I used to be afraid of him. When you and he were… well, when you and he were living here before… John Paul's father came back. I used to hear you two arguing and shouting at each other and I used to think 'how can she put up with it?' I couldn't imagine what I would have done if John Paul had ever shouted at me and said the things I heard Uncle Lucio say to you… I'm sorry, Merry. I shouldn't have said that."

"No, no. It's all right. I just wish you hadn't heard those things. Lucio has a bad temper, that's all. He's Italian. I know that's a stereotype, but I can see why it is. He never meant any harm and I think most of it was my fault or at least half of it. It was a mutual thing, I suppose. I never had any doubt that he loved me very much then. I don't think he loves any more…or, at least, it is not the same as before…" her voice trailed off again before continuing. "We were just meant to argue, I guess, but sometimes it was fun."

"Fun?" Michele actually giggled and Lucio felt his face burning. "The arguing or the making up?"

"Michele Sinclair-Ramsay! I'm surprised at you!" Merry laughed again. He hadn't heard her laugh in a long time.

"I'm sorry. It's just that it always works out in the movies. John never argues with me, so I don't know what it's like to make up. Do you still love him?" Michele asked her and Lucio held his breath. He didn't really want to hear this answer, but he couldn't make his feet move now.

"I do… very much, but he will never understand it," Merry said thoughtfully. "I don't understand it myself, but, yes, I still love him, but I love Mark Andrew more. I don't even know why. Lucio is everything that Mark Andrew is not and underneath all his arrogance, he is a wonderful person. Most people never see that part of him. If Mark Andrew and Lucio could merge together, I suppose they would make a perfect man, but who would want a perfect man?"

"I used to think John Paul was perfect except for his silence," Michele admitted. "Then something changed about him, but I don't think it was his fault. I think it was from outside. And now, he is more like his father I believe. Nothing lasts forever…" Michele's voice faded for a bit and then continued on a lighter note.

"Well, anyway. Sir Ramsay, he's a bird of different feather. He really scares me. He doesn't say too much until he's upset and then 'I canna understand a word o' it. I dunna think I cud bear it t' be around aboot 'im verra long.' And he looks so much like John Paul! Or rather I suppose it would be the reverse, but it's very confusing sometimes. I don't know how many times I've almost made the mistake of thinking he was John Paul and come very close to making a terrible faux pas. I wonder what he would have done if I'd walked up behind him and hugged and kissed him on the ear like I do to John Paul sometimes."

"Oh, he would probably like it, but he would say 'Whattar ye doin', lassie?' Or at least, I hope so. You can't ever tell with him. I don't think he knows how to have fun. A sham it tis, too," Merry imitated Mark Andrew's brogue perfectly and Michele laughed.

"Well, I would have died from embarrassment! I know that for sure," Michele said and he heard them making ready to leave the laundry room.

He hurried down the stairs to the cellar just before they emerged. He stopped at the foot of the stairs and looked up as they passed the open door carrying baskets full of folded laundry. He turned up the bottle of water and took a big swallow and almost spit it out. He had forgotten it was not

wine. He really wished that Merry had answered the question Michele had asked. They were different, but the same? What had that meant? They were everything each other was not?

Mark Andrew was in the laboratory setting the stones in place on the hilt of Marco's sword. Lucio pulled up one of the stools and propped his elbows on the table.

"Ye missed yer breakfast, Brother," Mark commented in his best brogue and Lucio almost laughed. He had not realized that eavesdropping could be so uplifting. At least Merry did not fault him as much as he had thought she did.

"I know," Lucio grumbled along with his stomach. "It's almost finished, no?"

"Aye." Mark Andrew squinted at the prongs on the diamond and then tapped on one of them very lightly with a tiny hammer. He was using a hand held magnifying glass with a wooden handle.

Lucio looked around the lab searching in vain for the magnifying arm lamp he had installed there. It was nowhere to be seen. He shook his head.

"I think it's coming along quite noicely."

"It's beautiful," Lucio agreed. "Do you think that I have a bad accent?"

"Wot?" Mark Andrew looked up at him. "When?"

"When I talk!" Lucio frowned at him. "What do you mean 'when'?"

"I dunno. I nevar paid it much heed, Brother." Mark went back to his work then looked up again. "Why?"

"Just wondering." Lucio looked up at the ceiling and squinted at the spider webs on the light fixture. The one that mysteriously no longer worked. "Do you think I will be able to find a suitable wife to raise Lucia Simone?"

Mark Andrew jerked his head up to stare at him in consternation. "How air ye plannin' to do it, Brother? Air ye goin' t' post a notice at th' local nunnery or wot?"

"Of course not!" Lucio told him indignantly. "I thought I'd just go out a bit and see what turns up."

"Oh. Well, then I suggest ye be verra careful. Especially in Rome or ye'll end up with more'n ye're bargainin' fur. I don't think ye can just go aboot lookin' fur a woife these days, Brother. Things don't work loike they

used to in th' old days. P'raps ye cud ask th' Grand Master t' 'elp ye locate one."

"What?!" Lucio shook his head adamantly. "And how on earth would the Grand Master be able to find a wife for me? What about love?"

"Love?!" Mark Andrew picked up the moonstone and turned it over and over, trying to decide which was the better side. "Ye're lookin' fer a mother fer yer daughter, not a lover. If it's love ye want, Brother, then go t' Rome."

"I can see that you are very confused here, Brother." Lucio stood up. "What about you and Merry? Why are you marrying her, mio caro? Don't tell me you're looking for a mother for your son?"

"Dunna be ridiculous!" Mark Andrew chuckled, but did not look up. "Thot's different."

"Oh. O' carse, 'ow silly uv me." Lucio turned away from him started back toward the cellar. He stopped at the door and looked back. "By the way. The Grand Master called this morning and I have to go to Italy before we can go after Lucia. He wants to talk to me." He raised both arms and made exaggerated quotations marks in the air.

"Aboot wot?" Mark still did not look around. He was totally absorbed in his work. He had no idea that he had insulted Lucio so badly.

"I don't know. I think he's still mad at me," Lucio told him.

"Did 'e want me t' come along?"

"He didn't say." Lucio left the alchemist to his lab and went in search of better company.

((((((((((((<O>))))))))))))

Simon was on the patio with the clurichaun. Paddy was busily expounding on all the wonders of the underworld. Simon had hundreds of questions about everything he had seen there and Paddy had hundreds of answers. Paddy was also busily refilling Simon's glass with 'water' when Lucio joined them. The Italian sat down heavily in one of the chairs at the glass-topped table and set his empty bottle on the glass.

"Lucky, me boy!" Paddy picked up the empty bottle and refilled it carefully from his pitcher with clear liquid. "Pierre was just askin' me

aboot th' thing in th' pool by th' waterfall. Did ye and Andy happen t' see it?"

"Oh, yes. We saw it." Lucio shuddered at the memory of the great eel-like creature with all the teeth.

"I was tellin' 'im thot it was an Unseelie Shellycoat. A verra big one. In fact, it's th' biggest one I've evar seen. I say it's Unseelie b'cause it feeds off th' sprites o' th' waterfall," Paddy told him solemnly.

"And what were the little things in the water? The ones that looked like seahorses?" Lucio asked him and turned up the bottle. He sprayed the table. It was not water! It tasted like liquid fire. "Santa Maria!" Lucio sat blinking at them and Simon laughed at him.

"Shhhh, Brother," Simon shushed him and Lucio was shocked to hear the slur in Simon's voice. "Sister Meredith will hear you and we'll be killed outright."

Lucio turned up the bottle more cautiously and took another swallow, much smaller. The stuff burned all the way down, but did not upset his stomach.

"Those wair Undines," Paddy answered his question and took up his pipe from the table to light the tobacco in the bowl. "They have human-loike faces or did ye notice?"

"No." Lucio shook his head as he reached in his pocket for his own pipe. He handed over to the clurichaun for a refill. "We didn't get that close."

"Ahhh, now, Laddie. Merry wud nevar approve. And it's good thot ye didn't get too close t' them," Paddy nodded and put the pipe in his own pocket. "Undines are mostly 'armless, but thair's other things in th' pools in th' underworld. Loike the Shellycoat. Even warse. Some day we'll go back thair together and I'll give ye boys a foine tour."

Lucio nodded thoughtfully, sorely disappointed about the pipe. It might not be so bad to go back there. It was very beautiful, but he'd pack a bag next time. His feet were still angry with him and he was still finding stickers in them.

"So, Brother," he addressed Simon. "Are you planning to come with us when go to search for Lucia?"

"I don't know," Simon smiled crookedly. "It depends on where you end up going."

"How so?"

"If you go to America, I might tag along," Simon told him. "I was planning to make a trip there very soon."

"Oh, really? Why?" This announcement surprised the Italian.

"I am looking for a wife," Simon told him solemnly and then hiccuped.

"What?" Lucio frowned at him. "Did you say a 'wife'?"

"Yes. And why not?" Simon frowned and turned up his glass.

"Does the Grand Master know this?" Lucio asked him.

"Of course!" Simon blinked and tried to focus on Lucio's face. Lucio wondered how much of Paddy's 'water' Simon had drunk already and why. Why was Simon sitting out here in mid-morning getting drunk? "He wasn't too happy about it, but he consented all the same. He has never failed to do whatever I asked him to do. I suppose it's the only thing he's ever done for his son… indulged his wishes." Simon leaned forward a bit and Lucio could see the anger in his eyes. "And all these years, Brother, I thought I was wise enough to advise him when he came to me. It wasn't that I had the answer for him. It was because he felt guilty." Simon laughed and Lucio almost cringed. "I could have told him anything and he would have went along with it. The company of women is a dangerous thing, but the love of a father for his son? Now there's a strange thing, oui? Fathers raise their sons to be what they are not and when it doesn't turn out right, then the whole world ends. He had great plans for me! Of course, I didn't even know about them until now. I don't know when he expected to tell me about them. He is very angry about what happened down there in the Abyss. He wanted me to be perfect. No matter what the cost. No matter how I might feel about it. He thought I was perfect, Brother. He practically said as much. Can you imagine that? Me? And now, I am nothing more than just another Knight of the Council. What a disappointment I have become to him. And he is insisting that I go off now to Israel to meet with some old men there. Friends of his, he says. Involving the Midrash. The Midrash! What do I need to know about the Midrash, Brother? The search for the Moshiach!"

Simon leaned back in the chair and turned up his glass again.

"What do you know about the Midrash and the Moshiach? The Moshiach. Isn't that the Jewish Messiah. The one they are still waiting for?" Lucio leaned toward him. "These things are not for Roman Catholics, Brother."

"And neither is Isis and Osiris, Brother," Simon said harshly and leaned toward him as well. "And neither is the magick of the Sumerians and the Babylonians. What do we need to know of these things, Signor?"

Lucio was taken aback by the priest's vehement tone. Never had he heard Simon speak in such a tone concerning the Mysteries of the Knights of the Temple. Solomon's Temple was, after all, of Jewish origins. None were ever more Jewish than King Solomon! And Lucio had always been in awe of the Jews, almost afraid of them, as it were. And whenever he had found himself in their midst, he had felt inferior and somehow unclean. The idea of Simon going to Israel to study in the Synagogues was a sort of reverse sacrilege by his way of thinking.

It suddenly occurred to him that he considered himself subservient to the Jews and he had never realized it. Even when he had been on the Campaigns to the Holy Lands, he had revered them and held them up higher even than his own Church. They were almost mystical to him. God's chosen people. He actually envied them in a strange sort of way.

"I think ye're bein' a bit 'ard on yer father, Pierre." Paddy walked about the bricks, picking some of the bright red flowers and bringing them to the table. "Th' Master has 'ad many sons in 'is loife, but ye wair th' one 'e loved th' most. Ye came closer t' bein' wot 'e wanted in a son than any o' th' others. 'e only wanted th' best fer ye. Yer father was favored o' yer god, Pierre, but 'e failed many times and oll 'is other sons failed even warse after him. None o' them possessed 'is strength and wisdom. 'e blames 'imself fer their failures. And 'e blames th' love of women fer their failures and their foolishness. But 'e is not an ignorant man, Pierre. 'e doesn't blame women fer the failure, just th' foolishness o' men concerning th' love o' women." Paddy laughed at Simon's expression. "Wair wud ye be without yer women, Pierre? 'e just doesn't want ye t' make th' same mistakes 'e did. Thot's oll. 'e olways knew thot if ye nevar had th' temptation, ye wud nevar 'ave th' opportunity t' fail. It's loike ye said, me boy, 'e thought ye wair parfect. Can ye fault a mon fer thot? 'e loves ye more than loife itself. Paddy knows these things. But if it's a lassie ye be lookin' fer, well, Paddy canna 'elp ye thair."

"If you know so much, Signor Puffingtowne, then can you tell me why he never told me who my father was?" Lucio looked at the clurichaun incredulously.

"Ye didna need t' know, Lucky," Paddy shrugged and began to make a bouquet of the flowers. "Wot good wud it'ave done ye? Ye wud 'ave been more miserable than ye olready wair. Wot wud ye have done? Throw yerself at yer father's feet and demanded 'im t' love ye? Demanded yer birthrights? Wot? I didna know yer father well, but I can tell ye this. Ye wud have been a terrible drag on 'is political image. 'e wud have packed ye off t' prison and thot wud 'ave been th' end o' Lucius of Venetia. The' Master knew this. But th' Master knew yer mother. She was a foine lassie. Th' Master kept 'er out o' tribble more thon once. 'e loved yer mother loike a daughter. And it near broke 'is 'eart when she died. Thair's many things you two boys don't know aboot th' Master. And it pains me t' 'ear ye speak o' 'im in such 'ostile tones. Ye'd do well t' leave well alone. 'e may not care fer me much, but thot's just because I know 'im too well."

Lucio sat up straight in his chair and considered Paddy's words. Simon made a face and closed his eyes.

"Sister Meredith would shoot us if she knew we were out here drinking, Brother," Simon said quietly. "I think I'd better go and take a shower or something."

"Now thot's a foine idea," Paddy nodded and picked up his bouquet. "I'm goin' t' go give this to Michele and I think Louie is aboot t' take th' boy down to th' stables fer a ride. Ye moight want t' go along with them, Lucky."

The two Knight's stared after the strange little fellow as he started off up the path to the house.

"How does he know all these things, Brother?" Simon asked when he was gone.

"I don't know." Lucio shook his head. "I should write down a list of questions and submit them to him for the answers. So it seems you have a great many brothers, Brother." Lucio grinned at the priest. "I never would have thought it."

"Neither would I." Simon stood up slowly.

"But, tell me, before you go…" Lucio caught his arm when he passed. "How do you plan to find a wife?"

"I have no idea." Simon raised both eyebrows. "I thought I'd post a notice at the nunnery."

He left Lucio sitting with his mouth hanging open. So Simon had been asking the Scot for advice as well.

((((((((((((<O>))))))))))))

Lucio caught up with Louis Champlain and Marco Niccolo at the front door.

"Where are you two off to?" he asked.

"I'm taking the boy down to the stables for a riding lesson." Louis grinned at him. "But don't tell the women. They think we're birdwatchers. Marco is learning to ride quite well, Brother. You would be proud to see him."

"They have a big black horse, Papa!" Marco smiled up at him. "And they say I'm the youngest to ever ride him. They say everyone is afraid of him. His name is Bollix because they say he always bollixed everything up. What does bollix mean?"

"I'm not sure." Lucio frowned. "I'd like to see you ride him."

"Then won't you come with us, or do you have something else to do?" Louis offered.

"I don't think there's anything pressing at the moment," Lucio said and looked over his shoulder, expecting Merry to be watching. "Would you mind if I tag along, Marco? You don't think I'd ruin your concentration, do you?"

"I suppose it would be all right." Marco frowned thoughtfully. "We could probably find an old nag for you to ride."

Lucio was taken aback by his statement, but then realized that the boy was making a joke.

"Oh, really? An old nag? I think I can manage to do a bit better than that," Lucio smiled at him.

"I don't know about that," Louis said as they started out the door. "Boy, did I ever tell you about the time in Jerusalem when your father and I had to share the same horse?"

"No, Uncle. Do tell." Marco tripped along happily beside the big Knight. He glanced back at his father. "I didn't know Papa fought in the wars with you!"

"Well, we were outside the walls when…" Louis took up the story and Lucio groaned inwardly.

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Mark Andrew looked about the lab and then down at himself ruefully. He had ruined his shirt… again. He held it away from his stomach gingerly to avoid being burned by the liquid that was eating a hole in the fabric and then hurried up the stairs, taking the shirt off as he went. He bundled it into a wad and headed to his room for another. He drew up short outside his door. It was standing open a bit and he could hear Michele and Merry inside, apparently cleaning. He'd never given this much thought before. But now he felt strange to think that there were two women in his room with his 'stuff', but how did he think his room stayed so clean? There were no bean tighes living in his house.

He started inside and then stopped again when he heard his name mentioned. They were talking about him! This was something else he'd never given much thought to before. What did they have to say about him? Probably not much. He didn't want to interrupt them now. They might think he'd been eavesdropping on them. He started to walk away and then his curiosity overwhelmed him. What were they saying about him?

"Back to our original discussion…" Michele was speaking. "I really am getting used to him now. But, at first, especially that first time I saw him when he came in the house with that sword. I thought we were all going to die or something. But he's just… well, he seems confused sometimes. Like he really doesn't know what to do or what to say. Maybe he just doesn't know how to talk to me."

"That's a possibility," Merry told her daughter-in-law. "I don't think I've had more than a dozen actual conversations with him in… oh, almost forty years now. Isn't that strange? But it's not like we've had a lot of time together out of all those years."

"I know the feeling," Michele sighed. "I can't say I've had many conversations with John Paul. I do most of the talking and he just nods or shakes his head or says 'no' or 'yes' or 'not good' or something to that effect, but we haven't had too many problems communicating. It's kind of weird. Now, when I first met him in college, we used to talk with sign language quite a bit."

"Really?" Merry sounded surprised.

"Yes," Michele laughed. "I thought he was a deaf mute and I knew sign language and so I tried it on him one day and he answered me and then we just started talking like that. You should have seen my face the first time he spoke to me."

"You should have seen my face when I heard him speak for the first time," Merry agreed whole-heartedly. "He was six years old and he'd just met his father. He'd never spoken a word in front of me. Of course, there was this terrible misunderstanding between Mark Andrew and myself and Mark had stormed out the front door in a fit of temper. Well, there he was… standing on the front porch, screaming 'Daddy, daddy, come back!' I actually fainted."

"Really?" Michele was shocked to hear this. "I had no idea. What was the problem?"

"Well, Mark Andrew had decided to ask me to marry him. Now, you have to understand, I hadn't seen him in seven years and I'd thought he had forgotten all about me and then all of a sudden, I start getting e-mail from him with poems and stuff, if you can believe it. So he came to propose to me. I didn't expect it. I just thought he was coming to take a look at his son. And I made the mistake of hesitating when he asked me to marry him. I guess I was in shock or something. He gave me this ring…" Silence. "Anyway, I was stupid enough to say something. I don't remember what it was and all of a sudden, things just changed. I took him up to meet John Paul and he didn't know that John didn't talk. I guess it was a real shock to him. But one thing led to another and boom! He just blew up and we started yelling at each other. It's not a pleasant memory."

"I would think not," Michele sympathized.

"But you should have seen him, Michele!" Merry's voice took on a different tone. "He was absolutely beautiful! He was wearing a black suit with a vest and… I can remember every detail of how he looked, but I cannot, for the life of me, remember what I said wrong. What I said to set him off in such a temper."

Mark Andrew felt his face burning with embarrassment. He should not have stayed and listened to this. He was flattered, shocked and ashamed at the same time. He turned away from the door and hurried away to Lucio's room where he 'borrowed' one of his Brother's shirts to wear.

When he went back downstairs to the lab, he passed John Paul coming up with two flasks of clear liquid. The prophet smiled at his father as they passed on the stairs.

"Papa," he nodded solemnly.

"Son," Mark replied, returning the nod.

Chapter Thirteen of Seventeen
I will pour out my spirit unto you

John Paul set the flasks of aguardiente and omiero on the counter in the kitchen and began to rummage about in the cabinets for the rest of the ingredients he needed. Michele came down from helping Merry change the bed linens upstairs and dumped off the load of bed sheets in the laundry before coming back to watch her husband curiously as he dug around in the pantry and the shelves.

"Can I help you find something, sweetheart?" she asked and he spun around to look at her in surprise. He hadn't even seen her pass through the first time.

"Cornmeal," he said shortly.

Michele went to one of the cabinets, took down a canister from the shelf and placed it on the counter. John Paul pulled a small plastic bag from one his pockets and scooped up a cupful of the meal to put in it.

"Eggs." John Paul looked at her expectantly. He had never been good in the kitchen.

Michele went to the refrigerator and brought back a bowl of eggs.

John Paul stuffed the cornmeal into a pocket and then pulled another empty bag from another pocket. Michele watched in fascination as he broke six of the eggs haphazardly in the sink. He emptied the shells of the sticky contents with a terrible frown on his face and then rinsed the shells, before putting them in the second bag. He crushed the shells inside the bag and then stuffed them in the same pocket with the cornmeal.

"Honey." He looked up at her.

"Yes?" She smiled at him.

He looked confused and then smiled. "No. No. Honey!"

"Oh!" Michele went to the pantry and brought back a small container of honey.

He set it on the counter beside the other two jars.

"Black pepper?" He nodded to her.

She handed him the pepper box.

"Cocoa butter?" John Paul looked about the kitchen.

"Cocoa butter?" Michele frowned. "You mean sun tanning oil?"

John Paul shrugged and then frowned as she led him from the kitchen to the downstairs bathroom. She found a tube of lotion with cocoa butter and handed it to him. He read the label on the brown and yellow tube and then stuffed it in his pocket.

He smiled broadly and then hurried up the stairs.

A few moments later, he came back down with a box. Michele looked up when he entered the kitchen again. He was dressed in white from head to toe. Michele was startled by his appearance. She had seen him dressed in white only once and that had been at their wedding. She didn't even know he owned white slacks.

He picked up the two flasks and the jar of honey and placed them in the box. Taking the box under one arm, he leaned to kiss her lightly on the cheek.

"Where are you going, John Paul?" she asked when he started down the hall.

"Church," he said without looking back.

Michele followed him to the front door and watched him get in the Mercedes and drive off. She turned away from the door and almost shrieked when she found Simon standing directly behind her.

"Oh, Uncle Simon! You scared the life out of me." she said in alarm.

"I'm sorry." He frowned as she closed the door. "Where is he going?"

"To church." Michele shrugged and headed back to the kitchen. Simon followed after her.

She began to take out the things she would need to make supper. She was going to take a chance and make lasagna. Lasagna was one of her favorite meals. She hoped that Sir Ramsay would not be too angry, but he would not be eating with them anyway. Simon leaned against the table with his arms crossed over his chest, watching her curiously.

She began to grow a bit nervous as he stood there silently watching her.

"Is there something I can help you with?" She paused to look at him on her way to the sink with the ground beef and sausage.

"No," he said brightly and then frowned. "Yes. Perhaps."

"And what would that be?" she asked as she retrieved one of the heavy cast-iron skillets from a hook on the wall by the stove.

"I am thinking of marrying," he announced.

"Oh?" Michele was shocked, but tried hard not to appear so.

"Yes." He smiled slightly when she glanced at him. "I was wondering if you might have any suggestions."

"Suggestions?!" She turned to look at him in outright bewilderment. "What kind of suggestions?"

"You're married," he said and waved one hand in the air in front of him as if this explained everything. "I was wondering how one goes about it."

"You mean how does one go about getting married or how does one go about finding someone to marry?" she was thoroughly abashed.

"I know how it's done. The vows… the ceremony, I mean," he said. "I would like to know how, for example, John Paul found you. I mean… how did you happen to… what made you two decide to get married?"

"We fell in love!" She laughed and then shook her head when she saw his disappointed expression. "Uncle Simon, I'm not laughing at you. It's just something that happens, you know. You meet someone that attracts you… you know, and then you sort of talk to them, you know, and then maybe you go out, you know, and then, well, you get to know them and before you know it, it's love. And, you know, you just kind of progress from there and when you know it's the right person, you just know it."

"Oh." Simon nodded. "That seems like an awful lot… of… of… knowing."

"What?" She frowned.

"You said the word 'know' nine times. That's the problem, Michele, I don't know. That's why I'm asking you. You are the only woman I know other than Merry and you are already married or else I would ask you to marry me."

Michele had to cover her mouth to keep from bursting out in laughter. Simon was serious and she could see that he was also just a bit drunk. Why he had been drinking so early in the day, she had no idea.

"I'm certainly flattered, Uncle Simon." She turned away from him quickly, before he could see her expression. "I suppose you might do better asking Merry to help you with your questions. Or maybe you should ask Uncle Lucio or even Sir Ramsay. I mean, you know… I'm sorry. I mean, they are more apt to know… I mean, oh God, Uncle Simon!" She turned to

look at him in consternation. “I don’t know, oh God!” She laughed and he actually smiled at her, obviously amused by her discomfiture.

“I didn’t mean to upset you, madame,” Simon told her, bowing at the waist slightly. “I just thought maybe you might have some pointers, some advice, on how I might go about finding someone suitable. You grew up in this age. You have more experience with young people than I do. Most everyone I know is very… ancient. In the old days, I would have just told my father that I wanted to marry and he would have found someone for me. Simple.”

“Well, things are not so simple any more,” Michele sobered a bit. It must have been exasperating for him. She couldn’t imagine how he must feel, but she couldn’t imagine why he had decided to marry after all these years. “Can I ask you a question?”

“Of course.”

“Why have you decided… at this late… sta… date to get married? I mean, after all these years?” She put the skillet she had been holding, which had become very heavy, on the stove and turned on the burner.

“I would like to have a family,” he answered without pausing. “You know?” He used her expression.

She turned to look at him again, but he was walking down the hall with his hands stuffed in his pockets.

((((((((((((<O>))))))))))))

John Paul set the box containing the items he had brought from the house on the bottom step of the bell tower at the chapel and then went down the steps to the crypt below the apse. He carried a flashlight, which he played about the eerie stone passage as he rushed along. At the end of the passage he found what he was looking for. A live trap and inside the trap, a rat. He picked up the trap and frowned at the creature as it scurried back and forth in a panic. He hated rats almost as much as his father did, but these things were necessary and he had to do what he had to do. The prophet carried the rat back upstairs, placed the trap on top of his box and then trudged up the stairs.

Dust motes filled the air in the small stone room beneath the big bell. John Paul set the box on the floor and began to take out the stuff he needed to perform the rite. He inspected each piece carefully. A black-handled dagger. Two pieces of white linen cloth. Several white candles. A box of matches. A small vial of pond water. That had been a harrowing experience. Most ponds around Lothien were on private property. Half a loaf of stale French bread. The omiero. The aguardiente. The cornmeal. The honey and pepper. The cocoa butter and the eggshells and small crockery bowls, cracked and worn, taken from his father's lab. As the sun climbed on toward noon, he set up the candles in the four cardinal points, lighting each one with a separate, sulfur match, grimacing at the smell. He poured some of the omiero in one of several bowls and added a dollop of honey, a dash of pepper, a dab of the cocoa butter, part of the pond water and then he removed another vial from yet another pocket to add a few drops of holy water to the mix. He spilled some of the salt from Michele's porcelain saltshaker, he hoped she didn't miss it too much, on the floor and then threw some over his left shoulder. He stirred the mixture with one finger and then drew a deep breath before beginning the ritual. He took some cowrie seashells borrowed from Marco's aquarium out of the box and a pair of lodestones from the old gardener's tool box and placed them in the bowl. He washed the seashells and magnets and then dried them with one of Meredith's monogrammed linen napkins and laid them on one of Lucio's fine silk shirts just fresh back from the cleaners.

John Paul opened the bag of crushed eggshells and made a crude design on the floor of the bell tower with them, then sprinkled it over with the cornmeal.

The priest stood up and took the flask of omiero to each of the cardinal points, raising it above his head, before spilling a bit on the floor at each point. A cloud passed in front of the sun and the distant sound of thunder reached his ears, causing him to cringe. He set the omiero on the floor and then mixed some of the aguardiente, pond water and honey together in another bowl. He set this bowl and the French bread in the middle of the floor and lit two more candles to place one on each side of the offering. The spirits of the nine black magicians raged in his head, causing him to wince in pain. Undaunted by their protests, he lay face down on the floor and offered up a prayer to Olodumare and then began to call on the names of the lesser gods associated with this ritual. Oshun. Elegua.

Obatala. Chango. Yemaya. This act pained the priest in him immensely. But he waited very quietly. Unmoving.

The storm approached and he knew that it came for him. When the spirit of Oshun possessed him, he got up quickly and began to sway back and forth to music in his head. He went to sit before a battered wooden box in the corner of the bell tower and carefully opened the lid. Taking out a lumpy bundle wrapped in tattered white cloth, he unrolled the cloth, he placed each item on the floor in front of him calling the name of each one.

"Templar Knight. Princess. Wizard. Dragon." He leaned down to look closely at the small pewter figurines.

He picked up the Knight and held it up.

"Chopono will protect you!" he said as the lightning struck very close to the church, causing the bell above his head to vibrate ominously.

He put it down and picked up the wizard.

"Olodumare will destroy you!" he said and then the lightning struck again as the wind picked up outside the church.

He put the wizard down and picked up the princess.

"Oshun will protect you." The wind whipped through the open windows of the tower and blew his hair in his face.

He put the princess down and picked up the dragon.

"Chango will defeat you!" The wind extinguished the candles in the room and the sky was almost as black as night.

He got up again and took all four figures to lay them on the second napkin and folded the corners over them.

"Oshun will offer the blood of the beast to seal the pact." He picked up the black-handled dagger, opened the trap and grabbed the rat before it could escape. When he cut its head off, it squealed and he screamed. He held up the rat's carcass in his left hand and let the blood drip on the white cloth, before flinging the body of the rodent out the window into the rain.

"O Lord, I commit my Body and my Soul unto Thee, seeing I put my trust in none beside Thee; it is on Thee alone that I rely; O Lord my God aid me; O Lord hear me in the day and hour wherein I shall invoke Thee. I pray Thee by Thy Mercy not to put me in oblivion, nor to remove me from Thee. O Lord be Thou my succour, Thou Who art the God of my salvation. O Lord make me a new heart according unto Thy loving Kindness. These, O Lord, are the gifts which I await from Thee, O my God and my Master, Thou Who livest and reignest unto the Ages of the Ages. Amen."

John Paul dropped the knife and pressed both of his hands to his temples before falling face down on the floor beside the bloodied white linen. The storm raged outside the church. The wind blew the rain inside the bell tower soaking the unconscious prophet.

((((((((((((<O>))))))))))))

The lights flickered and then went out. Since he was using oil lamps and candles in the laboratory, Mark Andrew took no notice of this, but he could feel the rest of the house go quiet above him. The washing machine, which he could hear in the basement stopped running, and numerous other small noises he had been unaware of, ceased.

He sighed and stood up. The storm had come on quickly and without much warning. The rain beat against the skylight over the oven in the corner. As he started up the stairs to check on the rest of the household, the wolfhounds began to howl in the library and chills coursed up his spine and spread over the top of his head. He shuddered and hurried up the steps.

Merry met him in the hall.

"Where is Marco?" she asked him immediately. "I thought he was with you."

"I don't know. I haven't seen him," Mark told her as she went to look out the back door into the rain. She turned and hurried back down the hall with Mark Andrew on her heels. Michele was in the kitchen.

"Michele? Have you seen Marco?" Merry asked her daughter-in-law.

"He went with Uncle Louis. Bird watching." Michele frowned. It was raining very hard now and the wind was buffeting the windows unmercifully.

"Bird watching?!" Mark Andrew frowned. Louis had taken up a new hobby?

Simon met them in the entry hall with an oil lamp. It had grown almost as dark as night.

"Where is Lucio?" Merry asked him.

"I don't know. I haven't seen him in a while." Simon frowned in the dim light of the lamp.

"Where is John Paul?" Merry spun around and Mark Andrew could see that she was about to panic.

"He went to the chapel," Michele told her.

"Now, Merry." Mark took her by the shoulders. "If the boy is with Louis, he'll be all right."

"Mark!" Merry eyed him doubtfully. "This is not just an ordinary storm. It is evil!"

"An evil storm?" Simon frowned deeply. "Why do you say that?"

"I can feel it!" She turned on him. "Can't you feel it, Brother?"

The dogs howled again in the library and they all turned at once to stare at the open doorway as something large crashed to the floor inside the dim recesses of the room. Mark Andrew took the oil lamp from Simon and entered the library first with the rest of them close behind him. They looked like a group of frightened school children invading a haunted house on Halloween. He raised his eyes to the stones above the hearth. Lucio and Meredith's wedding portrait no longer hung above the fireplace where John Paul had hung it after she had been lost in the Underworld. Mark was not upset to see the irritating artwork gone, but he had to wonder why it had fallen. The portrait was smashed on the hearth. He smiled ruefully. The fabric of the canvass torn and ruined. The gilt frame broken in several places.

"Holy Mary," Mark Andrew muttered and crossed himself and stared down at the portrait.

"Mark!" Merry held up one hand and listened intently. The wind was shrieking about the house now.

They all jumped in unison when the portrait burst into flames.

"Get back!" Simon shouted in their ears and then he and Mark Andrew grabbed up the flaming debris to fling it into the hearth.

Mark Andrew opened the flue on the chimney and the resultant draft of air literally sucked the burning fabric up the chimney and out into the storm. The wolfhounds, who had been cowering behind the sofa whimpering, suddenly burst from their hiding place and rushed past the startled foursome into the entry hall, barking and scratching at the front door.

"Wait in here!" Mark Andrew told them and Simon hung back in the doorway with Merry and Michele behind him, while Mark Andrew went

cautiously to the front door. The hounds barked and whined and scratched at the door as if they would dig their way out.

Mark Andrew put his hand on the doorknob and then suddenly threw the door open expecting something terrible to be there. He didn't even have a knife with him!

Louis Champlain rushed inside the entryway dragging Marco Niccolo behind him. Lucio came in after him and they stomped about the hall slinging water everywhere.

"Thank God!" Merry almost shrieked as she pushed past Simon to take Marco by the hand. Mark Andrew stood looking at the two Knights in wonder.

"What's wrong, Brother?" Lucio stopped shaking the water from his hair to look at Mark and then the rest of them. "You look like you've seen a ghost!"

"That's some storm!" Louis commented and headed down the hall toward his room, ignoring them all.

"You smell like horses!" Michele frowned at Lucio and then looked up as Merry dragged Marco up the stairs.

"Really?" Lucio raised both eyebrows.

"Aye." Mark Andrew frowned at the Italian. "Ye do smell loike 'orses."

"That's very odd," Lucio said and frowned as he shook his head and started up the stairs. "I've heard of raining cats and dogs, but never horses."

Mark Andrew stood at the foot of the stairs looking up at the lightning flashing behind the stained glass at the top of the stairs.

"Father," Michele said quietly and took Simon's arm. "A word with you, please."

Simon followed Michele back to the kitchen. The storm seemed to be fading now. It had been furious, but brief. Unnatural in its development and intensity. The sun came out and shone through the windows over the sink suddenly as if the clouds had simply vanished. Michele fixed the Healer a cup of coffee. He looked like he needed it.

She didn't quite know how to begin to ask him about John's 'work', but after a few moments, she felt terrible telling Simon about John Paul's curious behavior. Simon listened to her with keen interest. This sounded like more of the magickal stuff he abhorred so adamantly.

“Do you think it had something to do with the storm?” she asked in conclusion. “Do you think he caused the storm?”

“I don’t know. Possibly,” he tried to sound unconcerned for her sake. “But what would have caused what we saw in the library, Sister? Why would John Paul want to destroy the portrait? I do not think this evil storm came from your husband. Perhaps it came because of something he has hasn’t done. I’m really not at liberty…”

“I don’t know…” Michele’s voice trailed off as she wrapped her arms about her shoulders and shivered visibly before stirring the beef she had been cooking in the skillet. “He hasn’t been the same since… Sir Philip died. I have only seen him smile a few times since then and I miss his smiles terribly. He was smiling before he left here, Uncle Simon.” She was very close to tears now and Simon did not think he could handle it.

Simon stood up. He remembered well John Paul’s bright smiles and the completely brilliant innocence he used to exude. She was right. It was rare to see any remaining trace of it now.

“If he doesn’t come home soon, I’ll go look for him,” Simon tried to console her and patted her arm. She nodded to him through her tears and turned back to her work.

The lights came on again and Mark Andrew passed through the kitchen on his way to the lab. Simon followed him.

((((((((((((<O>))))))))))))

Al Sajek al Hafiz was extremely angry. He flew about his home in a rage, shouting and screaming at anyone and everyone unfortunate enough to cross paths with him, brandishing his sword menacingly at them and scaring them witless. This was one of the things that had earned him the dubious title of ‘the Mad Arab’. His servants fled for their lives ahead of his wrath and cowered about the garden and in the less-frequented rooms, waiting for him to calm down.

He had been trying to reach Semiramis for hours, but he was now blocked completely from her. She had surrounded herself with some sort of veil or fog he could not see through. And the prophet! He was out of control. What new magick was this? He felt as if someone had stabbed

him through and through with a hot poker. How dare they toy with him? How dare she hide herself from him? He had searched the Knight's home in vain for her. He had found the other woman and the son of the venerable Grand Master. He had seen Adar at work in his dungeon lair. He had seen the two Knights and the little one on horses, but he could not find Semiramis and he could not find the prophet, her son. He hated using the dog's hair. The animals were erratic and not easily controlled. This was not possible! He had borne down upon them with all his anger and destroyed the portrait of his beloved and the one called Lucio Dambretti. But that was child's play. He was growing tired of the game.

When his rage was played out, he went up on the roof and sat looking up at the stars. Beloved Semiramis, why had she deserted him? What had happened? Did she no longer wear the ring? He would have to go back to Scotland and seek her out. She would be made to obey him as a good wife should. There would be none of this running amuck. Three Templars! He would have to keep her locked away from the sight of men just as he had done before. And once he had merged her knowledge with his, he would have the power to control her completely. He went back to his bedchamber and summoned one of his cringing servants. He would make plans to leave immediately.

((((((((((((<O>))))))))))))

As soon as the storm had passed, Merry let herself out the back door and hurried toward the chapel across the meadow. The water sparkled in the grass like diamonds and the air smelled fresh and clean after the downpour. She wanted to check on the condition of the place she had chosen to conduct the ritual set for dawn the following morning. Rain was not something she had considered. She hoped that it would not be too wet or muddy under the oaks. She reached the oak grove around the chapel and walked about under the trees. The ground was wet, but not muddy. If no more rain came tonight, it would be dry enough by morning. She was about to return to the house when she noticed John Paul's car parked near the rear of the chapel.

Merry half jogged to the church and up the steps. The chapel was empty. No sign of John Paul anywhere. A shudder coursed through her. She no longer enjoyed this place. Too many bad things had happened here. She went cautiously to the bell tower door and peeked inside. No matter how John Paul dressed up the church with his precious artifacts and relics, it was still a cold empty place.

"Hello? John Paul?" she called out tentatively.

She did not want to go down the stairs. She could not go down the stairs.

"John!" she shouted more loudly.

"Mama?" John's voice drifted faintly down from above and she heaved a sigh of relief before looking up.

"John Paul? What are you doing… up there?" She looked up and then inhaled sharply at the sight of her son standing on the stairs. He was dressed in white, but there was blood on his shirt and smeared on his face and he was soaking wet. He looked terrible.

"Oh! John Paul!" She hurried up the stairs and reached to take his hand. "What happened? Are you all right?"

"Yes," he nodded and came slowly down the stairs with her.

"You're soaked!" she told him as if he didn't know. He leaned on her slightly as they walked down the aisle.

"Yes," he nodded again.

"Where did this blood come from?" She frowned up at him.

"Rat." He scowled and shook his head.

"Rats? Did a rat bite you?" she asked in alarm as she helped him to the car.

"No." He shook his head.

"Dammit, John Paul!" She opened the passenger door and shoved him inside, before running around to the driver's side.

"No cursing," he told her as she started the car and put it in gear.

"Cursing? You haven't heard cursing!" she said angrily. "I have been working very hard to stay cleansed and ready for the ritual tomorrow and what are you doing? What have you been doing? Why won't you talk to me? I know you can talk, John Paul. I've heard you talk. I've heard you speaking like… a… a normal person. I'm your mother! The least you could do is talk to me," she began to cry in spite of herself. Why was she angry with him? He was worrying her to death.

"I'm sorry." He looked down at his lap.

"Do you know where your sister is?" she asked him suddenly.

"No." He shook his head. "I lost her, Mama."

"You lost her?!" Merry almost ran off the road and jerked the car back onto the highway. "Lucio lost her. What are you talking about? Lucio is the one that screwed up, John Paul. Not you. Why do you blame yourself for what everybody else does? He is the one to blame."

"I took her from him," John Paul said simply and looked at her almost tearfully.

"What?!" Merry slammed on the brakes and jerked the Mercedes off the road. They skidded to a stop and she crammed the car in park before turning to face him.

"I took her from him," John Paul told her again.

"Why?! How could you have done such a thing?!" She was almost shouting at him now.

"It was the will of God," he said quietly.

"The will of God?" Merry felt she would faint. "Where is she now?"

"I don't know," he said sadly.

Merry put her hands over her face and began to cry uncontrollably. How could he have done such a thing? Why had he put her and Lucio through so much pain?

"Don't cry, Mama." He reached to touch her arm and she jerked away from him.

Merry looked up at him and then frowned. "Tell me why!"

John Paul got out of the car and came around to the driver's side. He opened the door, took her by the arm and pulled her from the car even though she resisted him and then held her by the shoulders.

"Look at me," he said and she closed her eyes stubbornly.

"Look at me, Sister!"

Merry opened her eyes, but did not want to look at him. She was just too angry.

"Look at me," he told her again and his voice had changed somehow. She was unable to resist his demand this time. She raised her eyes and saw something she did not want to see. The face of al Hafiz , the Mad Arab. The man in the blue turban. The old woman in Abyss on her way to market. The man who had saved her from the well spirit. The man who had come to the cottage and shown her the healing spells in the book. The

man who had taken her from the crypt below the chapel. The man who called her Semiramis and kept her in some sort of palace for days, treating her like she was a goddess or princess or… He wanted Lucia Simone. Why?

She saw Lucio and the baby in the car and the truck pursuing him across the desert and then the wreck and the abduction of the child and her nursemaid by a band of robbers. Then she saw another truck stopped in the road and the first truck slowed, unable to pass. Four men in long white robes got out of the second truck and approached the first truck. She jerked at the sounds of the gunshots. They had killed the men and taken the baby and the woman! The first truck was burning. She saw al Sajek walking around the truck, checking the bodies for life. She saw him take the baby from the nursemaid's arms and smile. Hundreds of images rolled through her mind and she saw Lucia again and again. Then things changed. She saw men running through the jungle dressed in military garb. They had painted faces and carried an array of impressive weaponry. They closed on an immense white house surrounded by a high, fortified wall. Then there was shouting and people running. There was the nursemaid, terrified again, holding the crying baby.

Merry frowned. John had rescued his sister from al Sajek's fortress! But when? How? The images continued. She wanted them to stop so she could ask questions, but they were too fast. As the glimpses unfolded, the little girl was older and more beautiful than ever. John Paul had visited her quite often. And then she saw a small house with a white fence. Inside the house was blood. Blood was everywhere and then she saw two people, a man and a woman, dead, lying in dark pools of blood on the floor of the house. Lucia was gone. This had been the child's home. These people had been caring for her and they had died because of it! She felt herself sag as John Paul caught her.

"I'm sorry," he said again.

He half-carried her around the car and put her in the seat. She sat silently, staring out the windshield as they drove back. What she had seen left her in a dazed stupor. Six people had died and she'd had no idea. Six people she didn't even know had died because of her child. And she had seen Lucio killed as well. Of this she had no doubt. He had died in the car crash when the truck had knocked him from the road. And Lucio had also been hung when he had returned to Africa looking for Lucia and Mark

Andrew had witnessed this in person. How could they go on year after year, disaster after disaster? And she had been almost oblivious to the fact that Lucio had suffered so severely on account of his folly and continued to suffer. The realization was almost more than she could stand. She had no right to hold him at fault. He would pay for his sins as they all would. Would she never, ever learn? She reached for John Paul's hand and he squeezed hers tightly.

"I will bring her home, Mother."

((((((((((((<O>))))))))))))

Simon sat again with Mark Andrew in the lab. Mark was setting the amethyst stone in the hilt.

"Michele is worried about John Paul," he said after a moment.

"I'm worried about John Paul," Mark Andrew responded absently. He hoped that nothing more would happen to his son. They had not told anyone what had happened. Only he and Simon and Paddy knew that John Paul had tried to commit suicide.

"No, I mean that she's worried that he has not come back from the chapel," Simon expounded.

"Oh." Mark Andrew looked up at him. "How long has he been gone? I saw him coming up from the lab not long ago."

"I don't know. He took some very peculiar things with him," Simon told him and reached to pick up one of the small jars littering the worktable. "Honey. Cocoa butter. Cornmeal. Egg shells. Some other stuff. What do you think he's up to?"

"I don't know." Mark Andrew laid down his tools and looked up at the ceiling thoughtfully. None of these things held any special meaning to him. There were not of his Art.

"Do you think it's part of Sir Philip's Mystery?" Simon asked quietly.

"It's John Paul's Mystery now," Mark reminded him. "It's none of our business, Brother."

"That's true, but if he doesn't come back soon, I'm going to look for him."

Mark nodded and picked up his little hammer again and held the magnifying glass over the stone. Simon leaned to look through the glass over his shoulder. He could see nothing.

"I asked Michele for advice concerning a wife," Simon said almost casually and Mark dropped his hammer.

"Why?" he asked and retrieved the tool from the counter.

"I need to know these things. You know," he repeated Michele's phrase.

"And what advice did she give you?" Mark Andrew had to ask.

"She said that things like that just happen. She said that you meet someone and just fall in love," Simon told him. "Is that how it happened for you?"

"I've never been married, Brother," Mark Andrew said lightly, trying to use a technicality on the priest to avoid the questions.

"I'm talking about love, Brother," Simon countered. "You are planning to marry. I would assume that you are in love then… with Merry."

"I would suppose so," Mark Andrew answered vaguely. This was not a subject he cared to discuss with anyone, let alone Simon.

"Then you just… fell in love with her? When?" he prodded.

"I don't know," Mark Andrew sounded a bit aggravated now, but Simon ignored his tone.

"How did you know you are in love with her then?" he asked and Mark Andrew laid down the hammer and turned to look at him.

"You just know," he told him and then frowned. "Simon, Brother. I don't know what to tell you. It's just one of those things that happen. A man meets a woman and they fall in love. First, they teeter. Then they totter. And then… they… fall. Fall is the keyword. Simple."

"Simple," Simon repeated the word. "Lucio told me once that he fell in love with Merry the first time he saw her."

"Really?" Mark Andrew turned back to his work, but could not concentrate on the fine detail needed here. Lucio had fallen in and out of love more times than Mark Andrew cared to remember and all with the same result: Disaster… for all parties involved.

"Yes. He said that she came down the stairs and he knew at once. She was the one," Simon told him as he nodded solemnly. "One look. One glance. One touch. One brush of a hand. He kissed her hand and it was all over. Poof! Do you think that's possible?" Simon's voice took on a sort of

dreamy quality as if he were remembering something or, possibly, imagining something.

Mark Andrew cut his eyes at him slowly without moving his head. This did not bode well. Complications. Complications. Why did he always have to face complications?

"Have you never been in love, Brother?" Mark Andrew asked him cautiously. "Even before you were… a priest?"

"I have always been a priest," Simon told him. "I think I was born a priest."

"Then why on airth wud ye want t' change thot now?" Mark's brogue popped out suddenly. "Wot parpose wud it sarve t' go gettin' oll riled up, tearin' out yer hair and jumpin' aboot loike a madmon? Thot's wot love is, Brother! It drives ye crazy and ye naver, aver understand it. Ye're just askin' fer tribble. Ye'd be bettar off if ye wud throw yerself over a cliff and get it o'er with. At least ye moight live o'er thot koind o' fall."

"Is that how you feel about it, Brother?" Simon asked him quietly. "I don't think it's all that bad."

"And then, air ye're tellin' me thot ye're oll ready in love?" Mark Andrew glanced at him. He sincerely hoped that his Brother, his friend and his priest were not about to say something that they would both regret.

"No!" Simon shook his head. "No, of course not."

"No lies, Brother." Mark Andrew looked at him again, unblinking this time.

Simon closed his eyes. He had made a terrible mistake. He should never have broached this subject with Mark Andrew, of all people.

"You're right," Simon spoke slowly and opened his eyes. "I am in love… with love."

"Oh," Mark Andrew nodded and then smiled. There would be no confrontation. Simon would not do that. He would lie. That was good. "Well, if you want my advice, steer clear of the entanglements. If you really want to experience something, go to Rome."

"I don't think so," Simon laughed. "That would be most unseemly and that would not be the sort of love I'm looking for."

"That would depend on your definition of love," Mark Andrew had to laugh as well. "But if you just need to get… I mean, if you just want to try… Dammit, Simon! You're making me curse! If ye want t' dip yur wick, go to Rome fur God's sake and get it over with."

"I would never lead you to sin, Brother. And you should not encourage me to the same end," Simon told him and stood up. "I talked to Lucio and he said that you might be going to America. I would like to tag along if you do."

"It makes no difference to me," Mark Andrew told him. "You can always find plenty of trouble in America. It's worse than Rome. And…" Mark paused "much too far from home."

((((((((((((<O>))))))))))))

Paddy Puffingtowne kicked at the soaked carcass of the rat lying on the ground beneath the bell tower and shook his head. He pushed back the hood of his cloak and looked about before scraping a pile of wet leaves and rocks over the horrid sight. He did not like these things. Foreign magick! Evil spirits and unseelie things. The storm had been a product of the unseelie court. The spirits riding on the wind in the dark clouds had come suddenly and unexpectedly and he'd had to flee for cover to save himself from being caught up with them. If he'd been caught out in the open, he might have been made into one of them. He had not seen such a thing in ages. The black magician was still working through the underworld in very dark ways.

The clurichaun looked up at the windows of the bell tower. A crow sat on the window ledge eyeing him curiously. Paddy could not go into the chapel. There were many powers at work there and they were much too strong for him to contend with. He wondered what John Paul had been doing up there that might have brought on the wrath of the sorcerer, but his mother had come to take him home. He would be all right.

Paddy pulled up the hood on his cloak and very nearly disappeared from sight altogether as he started back across the meadow toward the house. He needed to check the stock in the cellar and make sure everything else was all right there. Merry would be needing his help later on and he wanted to make sure that he got home in time to help Michele get rid of the supper she had made for the members of the household who were not fasting and then he needed to check on Johnny, of course. Aye! The night would be long and busy. Michele would need something to help her sleep

and he might as well fix the boy up so that there would be no chance of either of them becoming alarmed or interfering with Merry's magick. Johnny and Louie would be on hand, just in case reinforcements were needed, but Merry's magick was very strong now, although he was quite sure that she had no idea of the power at her command. On the other hand, it was good that she was afraid to wield it just yet. These things take time. Too much, too soon and the results could be disastrous.

He bent to pluck a tuft of clover in the meadow and tucked it into the pocket on his waistcoat for luck.

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No one saw John Paul helping his mother inside the house. She was still a bit shaky from what he had revealed to her and he was terribly regretful that he had not been able to delay it until after her ritual was completed. But his mother was much stronger than she looked and possessed more stamina than even she knew. She would recover in an hour or so and then things should progress on schedule. He could hear Louis Champlain explaining the finer points of rugby to Marco Niccolo as they passed the library's open door. Merry allowed him to escort her upstairs where he dropped her off at her room and then hurried away to get cleaned up before Michele caught him wet, bedraggled and covered with rat's blood. He didn't want to explain it to her. She would only be more upset than she already was with this thing his mother was doing.

Michele, like Simon and the Ritter von Hetz, equated magick with witchcraft and rightly so, but they were sore afraid of such things and there was no use complicating the issue by allowing her to know that he, too, was performing ritual magick on a different level, an even more ungodly magick than Paddy's and certainly less acceptable than the Wisdom of Solomon. His head still hurt and his body ached from his contact with Oshun. Of all the lesser gods of the pantheon he had invoked, he had been possessed by the female spirit! How strange it had been to feel and see through the eyes of a woman. He shuddered at the thought. The spirits had probably gotten a good laugh out of his reactions.

((((((((((((<O>))))))))))))

The Ritter von Hetz, Knight of the Apocalypse who Sees, was seeing Jozsef Daniel's new doctor for the first time since moving him to the facility in Berne. And he did not like what he was seeing. The doctor held out little hope for the boy. He remained totally withdrawn and unresponsive to the first attempts they had made to reach him. The restraints were still necessary to keep him from injuring himself and he still lay on the bed, staring at the ceiling, banging his head on the pillow whenever someone tried to speak to him or examine him.

Von Hetz spent two hours sitting in a chair next to his bed, simply watching him. Only once had the boy turned his head to look at him. Joszef had blinked his bright blue eyes twice at him before beginning to bang his head again sing-songing the la, la, la, la, la monotone that von Hetz had witnessed in Prague. The doctor had been very sympathetic and knowledgeable and had suggested several courses of action that might be considered for treatment. Von Hetz had taken in the psychiatrist's words and had then taken all the pamphlets and written information concerning these plans for perusal at his convenience. He would study this situation carefully before making any decisions. Some of the procedures had been radical new practices and the Ritter was very reticent to make snap decisions. Besides, the Grand Master had ordered him to discuss anything and everything having to do with the boy with him prior to making any decisions. He would make sure that the Grand Master knew everything about this situation. He could not take on the responsibility alone. Not this time. Not with John Paul's son.

He stood up quietly and prepared to leave the room. There was no use staying with the boy any longer. His presence seemed to upset the child immensely.

The Ritter raised his hand to knock on the door and was startled by the sound of the boy's voice behind him, speaking in a normal tone.

"Wizard! Princess! Dragon! Knight! Papa!"

The words were English! The boy should have been speaking Romanian or perhaps, German or one of the other eastern European languages. Certainly, the child had not been exposed to English on a

regular basis, if ever. The Ritter spun around and went back to the bed to look down at the boy.

Joszef turned his crystal blue eyes on him and smiled. Von Hetz stood perfectly still. These were the words that John Paul used to say to him when he was the same age as this child. He waited for the boy to say more, subconsciously holding his breath.

"Chopono will protect the Knight. Olodumare will destroy the wizard. Oshun will possess the princess. Chango will defeat the dragon. Oshun will offer the blood of the beast to seal the pact," the boy spoke quite clearly and then he snarled like an animal before spewing a long string of oaths in German that made Konrad grimace.

The boy stopped talking and turned his head slowly on the pillow to stare at the ceiling again. The names he invoked were very strange to von Hetz. He had never heard them before. They sounded very foreign. Indian perhaps? Or Spanish?

"O Lord, I commit my body and my soul unto Thee, seeing I put my trust in none beside Thee; it is on Thee alone that I rely; O Lord my God, aid me," the Ritter whispered a quick prayer and crossed himself.

Von Hetz was not upset by this outburst. On the contrary, he was quite pleased. The boy had a brain that functioned quite well it seemed. But he had proven two things to the Ritter by his words. Primo: He was not an ordinary child at all. Secondo: He was possessed by demons.

An exorcism was in order, but it would not be possible to accomplish such a thing in a hospital setting. He would need permission to move the boy to a more private place. That would take some doing and a great deal of persuading and even a bit of groveling and begging…

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Merry lay on her bed with her eyes closed. She had a great deal of work to do before noon tomorrow and not much time to rest. The experience with John Paul had drained her strength entirely and she needed every ounce of fortitude she possessed. John Paul's involvement in the abduction of Lucia Simone somehow did not surprise her. But it did make

her angry and anger led to sin and sin would destroy all the hard work she had done for the past several days. She forced her mind away from the anger and slowed her breathing. If the others discerned something amiss with her, they would ask questions and she would have to lie and so on and so forth. Bounce back! Gain control. Take care of the business at hand and then be angry later!

She got up after resting only ten minutes and checked the items she had been cleansing for the ritual. Pen and paper. Candles. Dagger. Censer. Incense. Matches. The perfumes. A small, leather-bound notebook. She checked her uniform over carefully to make sure it was spotlessly clean and then inspected her sword and her dagger and her helmet and boots in the same meticulous manner. Everything was ready. Everything had been properly exorcised and cleansed. She went about the room setting up the other things for the cleansing ritual she would have to perform before they went to the oak grove at dawn, setting up fresh candles, refilling the secondary censer with new frankincense. She cleaned the bathroom again and removed all the personal items from the counter and shelves, securing them in the cabinet. Nothing would be present that might detract from the cleansing ceremony. Nothing impure, nothing even remotely imbued with negative influences. When she was sure that the bath was ready, she lit a candle on her dresser and knelt beside the bed to ask for guidance from her Creator and specifically for forgiveness for having spoken harshly to her son. She also asked for forgiveness for having blamed Lucio for what had happened to Lucia. She then sat in the middle of the floor and meditated on the task before her.

The original plan had been to take Simon first and then Mark Andrew and Lucio last, but she had since changed her mind due to the difficulties she had experienced with them in the confessions and invocations of the past two days. She had decided to take Mark Andrew first and then Lucio and then Simon. Mark Andrew would be easiest. She would take Lucio second because she thought he might be most difficult. Simon should not be too great a problem. And if she needed help with Lucio, then Mark Andrew would already be taken care of and he could help her with the unruly Italian. And Simon had been so very cooperative and wonderful. But then, there was that one small detail… oh, but surely Simon would not want to mess things up now. He would be all right and she could regain her

composure by the time she was done with him and they were on their way to the chapel at dawn.

She surveyed her work one last time and decided that all was ready. The clock on the dresser showed almost four o'clock. She went downstairs to look for her 'disciples'.

Michele was nowhere to be seen, but the smell of the lasagna baking in the oven made Merry's mouth water. She would be glad to be finished with the fast herself. She was starving for a good steak and maybe some French fried potatoes and chocolate cake. Marco and Louis were out front on the lawn, practicing their swings again while Paddy was attempting to play with the wolfhounds or they were playing with him. She couldn't tell which was occurring. She watched momentarily as Paddy threw the stick for them and they went off to retrieve Champlain's golf ball instead and then trampled the little red-haired man on their exuberant return. Marco had taken a great liking to the sport of golfing and Merry was immensely pleased that he had found a good companion in the Frankish Knight. And Champlain seemed to enjoy the boy's company thoroughly. John Paul was not in evidence and Merry assumed that he and Michele were together somewhere.

All three of her 'disciples' were found in one place. The laboratory, of course. They were admiring Marco's new sword and toasting the success of Lucio and Mark's endeavors with mineral water. They looked up at her expectantly when she tapped on the open door.

"What do you think?" Mark asked and held up the sword for her to inspect.

"It's great. Remarkable. I think he'll love it," Merry told him and took the small broadsword in her hand. It seemed a bit heavy for such a small boy, but it was what he'd asked for and she had still not had the opportunity to argue the case for toys with John Paul. She handed the sword back to Mark Andrew and then drew a deep breath.

"After supper I want you all to retire to your rooms and meditate in prayer until midnight. At midnight, I want you to take your showers and dress in your full uniforms."

"Uniforms?" Simon frowned. He had never liked the uniform. "I thought we'd be wearing robes or something."

"No. Uniforms… full uniforms. Helmet, gloves, sword, dagger," Merry told him. "If your uniform is in need of laundering, I will do it for

you, if you will bring it down to me now."

Lucio frowned. He hadn't seen his in a while. Mark rolled his eyes thoughtfully and Simon shook his head. His uniform was hanging in the closet in his room, right where he had left it, encased in a plastic bag.

"I think maybe I'd better go and check on mine," Lucio muttered and got up from the stool.

"Aye." Mark Andrew stood as well. "I haven't seen mine in a while and a bit."

When they were gone, Simon turned a quizzical look on her. "John Paul, is he all right?" he asked. She was startled by the question. "I saw you come home with him. He had blood on his shirt."

"He's fine," Merry said shortly. She hadn't thought anyone had seen them.

"What about you, Sister?" he asked her quietly. "Are you all right?"

"Yes," she nodded and then picked up the sword again to look more closely at the sapphire, which represented her birth in September.

"I spoke to Michele about getting married," he said quickly and she looked up at him in surprise.

"Why?" she asked.

"I thought she might have some idea of what I need to do to find a wife," Simon told her in all seriousness. Merry did not want to hear this. She still did not accept the idea that Simon wanted to marry. It just didn't seem right at all.

"What did she tell you?" Merry frowned. She could well imagine how this must have surprised her daughter-in-law.

"She told me to talk to you… and Mark Andrew."

"Oh, really."

She laid the sword down again, crossed her arms over her stomach and leaned against the worktable. "And did you talk to Mark Andrew?"

"Yes," he nodded. "He virtually chewed me out and suggested that I throw myself over a cliff instead."

"You're kidding!" Her mouth fell open in surprise.

"Not at all." Simon shook his head, amused by her reaction to his words.

"Is that how he feels about marriage?" she asked.

"Apparently so," Simon sighed. "I asked him how it happened between you two."

"And just what did our beloved Brother say to that?" she asked, now clearly aggravated.

"He said 'A man meets a woman and they fall in love. First, they teeter. Then they totter. And then… they… fall. Fall is the keyword. Simple.' Those were his exact words, Sister," Simon told her. "Teeter. Totter. I have no idea what he meant. I didn't teeter or totter and I don't recall falling. I mean, I don't remember anything like that. It just seemed like a sudden realization. You leaned your head on my shoulder. That was it," Simon paused and took a deep breath. "It was like Mark Andrew said. Very, very simple."

"Simon," Merry said. She did not want to hear this at all. Especially not today. Not with what lay ahead of them.

"I know. I'm just telling you how it felt for me. I don't expect a response, but I would like to know how you knew you were in love with him." Simon's expression was one of sincere curiosity.

"Well…" Merry tapped one fingernail against her bottom teeth. She had never thought of it. At least, she had never considered when it had been exactly that she had decided she was in love with Mark Andrew. She thought back momentarily to that ancient age gone past. "Well, I think I realized it as you say because I didn't fall. He fell on me."

"How so?" Simon frowned.

"He had been terribly wounded by Sir Beaujold. The sword had gone right through him and he'd rode out into the pastures on Valentino's horse. He'd been riding all night and he'd lost a lot of blood. All of it, I guess. Anyway, I caught up to him at the creek and there he was, sitting on the horse like he was asleep. The horse was walking down the creek bed. I called the horse up out of the water and tried to help him down. He fell on me. It was probably one of the worst moments of my life. I thought he was going to die. I still didn't believe what Valentino was telling me about the immortality thing then. I stayed with him there at the creek until he woke up again. That's when he got the silver earrings in his hair. His hair got all tangled up in my earring and I couldn't get it loose so I just braided some of his hair down around it and put the other one there on an impulse. He has such beautiful hair…" Merry's voice faded away momentarily and then she snapped back to the present. "Anyway, you know the rest of the story. But that's when I finally realized who and what he was and how much I loved him. It had really happened without me knowing it until then."

"That's a very… romantic story," Simon told her. "I appreciate the fact that you have shared it with me. I had no idea, Sister. Perhaps I, too, could have an adventure with a lovely lady and she would fall in love with me, oui?"

"You never know, Brother." Merry smiled at him. "But be careful what you ask for. You just might get it."

Simon frowned at the warning.

"Mark Andrew's adventure was quite painful if you will remember," she reminded him.

"Ah, oui, but it was worth it, no? I suffered some injury on that mission as well. I would hope that I might have earned just a bit of your love for my part," he laughed softly and then his face turned red.

"Merry!" Lucio's voice startled them. "I think my uniform needs washing." Dambretti stood in the doorway of the lab with an armload of wadded white cloth. It was terribly wrinkled and definitely in need of attention.

"All right." Merry pushed herself off the table. She was glad for the interruption. Simon's attitude and his simplicity of expression of his love for her unnerved her. But he asked nothing of her and even made light of his hopeless situation. Simon was certainly a horse of a different color.

Lucio followed her to the laundry room. They hadn't been in there together since he'd tried to choke her and Louis Champlain had beat him senseless for it.

"The Grand Master called me this morning," he told her as she shook out his surcoat and mantel.

"Really?" She frowned at the uniform. What had he done? Stuffed it under his bed? It was virtually brand new. Both she and the Knight of the Golden Eagle had received new uniforms after their terrible experience in the red water. Their old uniforms had been stained dark red by the water and she had learned that the Grand Master had had them burned.

"The Master said that our annulment has been granted."

Merry jerked her head around in surprise.

"No kidding?"

"I wouldn't kid about such a thing, Merry," he said darkly. "He said that the secular part would be up to us. You can file or I can file for the divorce."

"Why?" She raised both eyebrows. "What difference does the secular part make anyway? If and when Mark Andrew and I throw ourselves off a cliff, we won't be able to get a license. You know how hard it was for us. I wouldn't even bother with it. Simon says that it will make no difference. He says that you and I are joined as man and wife in the eyes of God and nothing can change it. No annulment granted by the church nor any legal paper can put asunder what God has joined together."

"What are you saying, Sister?" Lucio's dark look turned to a frown.

"I'm saying that marriage is until death do us part, Brother," she told him sternly. "Simon is perfectly right. It doesn't matter what we do or what we think, God made that rule. We can't change it with a hundred papers from the Pope or a thousand divorces from the courts."

"Does that mean you won't be filing for a divorce?" he asked her.

"Exactly," she said shortly. "The only way you will get a divorce is to file for one on the grounds of adultery. I looked it up after he told me that. It's in Deuteronomy, chapter 24, verses one and two. I memorized them, Brother. It says 'when a man hath taken a wife, and married her, and it come to pass that she find no favour in his eyes, because he hath found some uncleanness in her: then let him write her a bill of divorcement and give it in her hand and send her out his house. And when she is departed out of his house, she may go and be another man's wife.' The ball, as they say, is in your court."

"You mean that if I do not want to give you a divorce, then you will stay married to me?" he asked in confusion.

"The New Testament makes the matter even more severe, Brother," she told him. "Jesus Christ said 'But I say unto you, that whosoever shall put away his wife, saving for the cause of fornication, causeth her to commit adultery: and whosoever shall marry her that is divorced committeth adultery'. Sin is a sin is a sin. At least that is what I've always heard. You will be the only one clear of it."

"But if the church has granted an annulment, then no divorce is necessary. You can simply marry him in the church and forget about the legal rigmarole," Lucio suggested. He did not like the sound of this.

"And what would your prospective new wife think if you could not get a license to marry legally because you are still married to me?" She blinked at him.

Lucio stood staring at her.

"I assure you, Sister, that any woman who marries me will have to know what I am. If she can accept what I am and who I am, then she will accept the terms of the marriage," he said after a bit. "If God's marriage is not acceptable to her, then she will not be acceptable to me."

"Then all you have to do is write out a bill of divorcement, whatever that is and put it in my hand, but you will have to list the reason as fornication," she told him.

Lucio blanched. "That is a strong word, Sister."

"It is what I have done. But I have confessed my sins and begged for forgiveness," she told him lightly.

"And what will you do? Live as these Born Again Christians? Sin today and beg forgiveness tomorrow for the rest of your life? Or will you marry Mark Andrew and have him do it?" Lucio asked and crossed his arms over his chest.

"I don't know," she said and turned her attention back to the task of laundering his uniform.

Mark Andrew chose that moment to show up with his uniform. It, too, was in need of cleaning. He drew up short at the sight of them in the laundry room. There was something in the air and on their faces that he did not like.

"What?" He looked from one of them to the other.

"Nothing," Lucio told him abruptly before leaving them.

"I'm afraid my uniform has been lying in the bottom of my closet." He shrugged. "I don't know how it got there. I think I threw it there after I wore it in the rain. It smells funny."

Merry smiled and took the wrinkled cloth from him. They had not worn them since they had participated in Louis Champlain's ceremony when he put the Stone in the Golden Key.

"What were you two talking about?" He leaned on the door where Lucio had been leaning only moments before.

"We were talking about the divorce," she told him honestly. "But I don't want to talk about it any more right now. I just want to concentrate on this ceremony and what I have yet to do. We can talk about it some other time."

"Did he tell you he has been summoned to Italy as soon as this is over?" Mark Andrew asked her.

"No. He didn't." She shook her head. "Why?"

"He doesn't know. The Grand Master wants to talk to him." Mark Andrew sighed. "He thinks it's because the Master is still angry with him and wants to chastise him some more. I think it might be a bit more involved than that."

"How so?" Merry looked up at him and then reached for the laundry detergent and bleach.

"The Grand Master has chosen a new Seneschal for the Order," Mark Andrew said blandly.

"You don't think he's going to make Lucio the Seneschal, do you?" She frowned down at the washer lid.

"Who can know the mind of Edgard d'Brouchart?" Mark asked and smiled ruefully. He had been thinking again about who might be Sir Philip's replacement in this respect and he had ruled out everyone of them for various reasons. Everyone except Lucio Dambretti. He was the natural choice.

Chapter Fourteen of Seventeen
the words of the wise, and their dark sayings

Paddy sat on the bottom step of the stairs in the cellar listening to Simon singing in the laboratory. He had never heard him sing before. Unlike Ramsay and Louis and the others, his voice was much more suited for it. He wondered why the priest was singing now. Though he had a wonderful voice, it was much too smooth and graceful for the Irish folk songs that Paddy liked. Even still, it was pleasant enough listening to it. The language was Latin and the song was very old. A church song, no doubt. He cocked his head to one side thoughtfully, listening for the key before putting his bagpipes under his arm and pumping it full of air. When he picked up the tune of the song on the pipes, Simon stopped singing and came out to look at him in surprise.

"What are you doing, Paddy?" he asked after listening for a moment.

"Tryin' t' understand yer song, Pierre," Paddy said as he continued to play. "It's a luvly tune."

"It's a sequence, a liturgical piece. It doesn't have musical accompaniment. I mean, it usually doesn't have music…" Simon told him. "I used to sing it during mass. It's devoted to the Virgin."

"Ye sang in th' charch, did ye?" Paddy asked.

"Of carse… I mean of course," Simon nodded. "It was the way of things then. To learn all those prayers and sermons, it was easier to memorize tunes, I suppose."

"Wot do th' words say?" Paddy asked him.

"It's about the misery of the Virgin when she watched the crucifixion of her Son, Jesus Christ." Simon looked down at the floor. He had no idea why he had been singing such a sad song.

"Ah," Paddy nodded. "It's 'ard t' believe such a beautiful song wud be aboot misery."

"Some of the most beautiful things make men miserable," Simon told him.

"Ah," Paddy nodded again. "Ye're talkin' aboot love now, Pierre."

"You are very perceptive." Simon smiled at the clurichaun.

"Air ye ready fer th' big ceremony tonoight, Pierre?" Paddy asked him.

"Of course," Simon nodded.

"Ye'll need oll yer fortitude, me boy." Paddy glanced at him from under his bushy red brows. "I hope ye're as truly committed t' Merry's parpose as ye claim t' be, else ye'll foind yerself in hot water as 'twere."

"I would never do anything to distress or deter Sister Meredith." Simon leaned on the wall near the foot of the stairs. He looked down at the clurichaun suspiciously. "What could there possibly be that would make me fail her in this?"

"Oh, sometimes th' simplest things air wot give th' most tribble." Paddy met his gaze thoughtfully. "Things thot a babe cud do without th' least bit o' tribble, a grown mon moight foind olmost impossible t' accomplish. But yer woise men say thot ignorance is bliss and so tis. I say thot innocence is bliss, Pierre. Tis wot's in a mon's 'eart thot makes 'im innocent or guilty. If yer luv fer th' lassie is pure then ye'll manage. If ye're innocent o' malice and intent, ye'll manage. Ye have t' keep th' proper perspective. Ye'll have t' draw on yer past, Pierre, and remember who ye air and wot ye air. Ye've spent th' last few 'undred years givin' counsel t' th' poor and th' downtrodden. Take heed o' yer own counsel now, me boy."

"I will be glad to have it over, but I will not be glad to leave here. I like it here. I would stay here, if I could."

"Why can't ye stay here, laddie?" Paddy asked and stopped playing the pipes.

"It wouldn't be proper," Simon told him. "I believe you know why. Anyway I expect to have a new direction in life very soon."

"Don't go getting' yer hopes up, me boy," Paddy shot him a warning glance. "Don't be rushin' into anything. These things take toime. Th' problem with yer koind is thot they live too fast. O' course ye have a bit of an advantage o'er most men. Yer loife's not likely t' run out so fast as some, if ye're careful. Take me, fer instance, I've nevar married and I'm perfectly 'appy."

"Do your kind marry then, Paddy?" Simon asked.

"Sometoimes," Paddy shrugged. "Stranger things 'ave 'appened, I s'pose."

"And so there are lady clurichauns?" Simon asked him.

“I’ve nevar seen one meself,” Paddy shrugged.

Simon laughed softly.

“Then who would you be marryin’, Paddy Puffingtowne?” Simon ventured.

“Oh, I moight marry someone loike Michele,” he said solemnly. “But thair is Johnny to contend with. Oll th’ good lassies air taken, Pierre.” Paddy laughed.

“Surely there must be one or two more around somewhere.” It was almost time for supper and then he would have to go to his room to meditate as Merry had instructed them. He wondered what he should meditate about.

“Oh, pr’aps,” Paddy told him and stood up. “I’ve a bit o’ business t’ take care of, Pierre. Ye’d best go on up t’ supper or ye’ll be moighty hungry before th’ noight is o’er.”

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The three poor Knights of Solomon’s Temple were pleasantly surprised by the supper Merry set before them. Baked white fish with cream sauce set on a bed of white fettucine. Lucio was especially thankful for the food since he had missed breakfast. They sat at the table in silence, occasionally glancing at one another.

Each one wore a different expression. Merry seemed very worried as she looked at first one of them and then another as if she were trying to read their minds or make some sort of evaluation. Mark Andrew appeared to be distracted as if he kept forgetting where he was, pausing and then starting again as if he had suddenly remembered something. He didn’t seem to notice Merry’s scrutiny of him at all. Simon had a thoughtful frown on his face. It was not the old sad look, but something different as if his mind were racing about from one topic to another and it seemed, at times, that he was about to speak to them and break the silence, but he did not. Lucio watched his Brothers and his Sister with a dark expression in his eyes. He appeared to be thinking that perhaps they knew something he did not know. He was edgy and almost jumped out of his chair when Mark Andrew dropped his knife in his plate.

When the prayers were over, Merry kissed each of them lightly on the lips and sent them off to their rooms for private meditation like small children. Mark Andrew was the last one up the stairs. Merry stood at the foot of the stairs looking up at him. He turned and hurried back down to stand beside her.

"Does it matter what we meditate about?" he whispered and she smiled at his deeply concerned expression.

"There is no set prescription for it, no. I would think you should meditate about the ceremony."

"I don't know what the ceremony entails, Merry," he reminded her. "Only you know that. I have a hard time meditating and you should know that as well. Sometimes, I get completely off track and then I do things I shouldn't do. I thought you might have some suggestions that would keep me from straying too far. Four hours is a long time to just sit and think. At least it is for me. I might be in a dander by midnight if I sit and think for four hours. Can't we take a walk or something before I go up? Or would it be all right if I go and meditate for a bit and then go to sleep?"

Merry had to suppress the urge to laugh. Mark Andrew was truly disturbed.

"Or could I perhaps meditate in the laboratory?" he asked hopefully. "If I could find something to do, I could…"

"No!" She shook her head. "If you're doing something, you won't be meditating."

His face fell and she wanted to give in.

"Look," she took his arm and began to walk him up the stairs. "How about this? Go upstairs and lie down. Sleep until ten o'clock and then meditate for an hour. At eleven, you can start to get ready for the cleansing. You can take your shower and get dressed and then mosey down to the library and wait for me to call you. I'm going to call you first."

"Oooh," Mark Andrew nodded solemnly. "I'll be first? I like that, I do."

"Of course," she said quietly. "You were always first with me, Mark Andrew." She patted the back of his hand as if to comfort him.

"Thot sounds loike a foine strategy," he said and again, she had to repress the urge to smile. "Take out the most formidable foe at the start and then the rest will be child's play."

"I hope you're right about that."

He had no idea how much thought she had put into the order of this part of the ritual, but she did not think Mark Andrew would be the hardest part.

"Who's second?" he asked when they stopped in front of his door.

"Lucio," she said distractedly.

"That's exactly how I would do it if I were you," he said then added quickly. "If I were planning it, I mean."

"Really?" She smiled up at him as she placed one hand on his doorknob. She opened the door, intending to push him inside. She needed to get rid of him. He was breaking her concentration… severely.

"I would be your most stubborn student and then Lucio would be a bit less hard-headed and, of course, Simon would never give you a problem. Why I remember once when we were on campaign in north Africa and Lucio was…"

Merry held up one finger in front of his lips to cut him off. She always wanted to talk to him and now that she had no time and there were other things she had to do and he needed to meditate and they were standing in the hall and… he had to go! She had to go. He was stalling.

"I see… OK, then. Well…" Merry nodded and then leaned toward him and kissed him again, surprising him. "Thank you, Mark Andrew."

"For what?" He raised both eyebrows.

"Just for being you." She smiled genuinely. "Simple."

"Simple," he repeated his favorite word. Things should go quite well. Whatever they were. He didn't resist when she pushed him inside his door and closed it in his face. When he heard her footsteps retreating, he went to his bureau and took out a bottle of white wine. As he turned it up and took a long drink, making the requisite face at the taste of the weak stuff, he wondered which of them had received the 'special herb' in his supper dish?

((((((((((((<O>))))))))))))

"Ye're ready fer this thing, then, Johnny?" Paddy puffed on his pipe and looked at the prophet who sat quietly at the glass-topped table dressed in his usual black attire now.

John Paul nodded.

“I’ll do me best t’ keep things in order whilst they get ready,” Paddy told him. “I expect thot thair may be a bit o’ tribble wi’ th’ Healer.”

John Paul nodded again and smiled.

“Thair’s nothin’ we can do aboot thot,” Paddy lamented, shook his head and picked up his mug of beer to take a long pull. “I gave ’im me best advoice. Pr’aps we’re worried aboot nothin’.”

“Pr’aps,” John Paul agreed.

“Louie will be standin’ ready?” Paddy glanced across the open fields to the west and then to the east.

“Yes,” John Paul nodded.

“Good.” Paddy turned up the beer and drained the glass. “Weell, laddie, I’d best be off t’ me wark then.”

John Paul watched him go and then turned his head toward the east. It would be a long night.

((((((((((((<O>))))))))))))

Paddy stumbled into the library, straining under the weight of the heavy wooden tray he carried. Michele came to his rescue and took the tray from him.

“What’s this?” she asked looking down at the stuff on the tray as she set it on the table.

“Popcorn!” Marco supplied the answer as he slid from the sofa where he had been sitting beside Michele. She had been reading to him from the Bible. “And Coca Cola!”

“Aye!” Paddy announced proudly. “Thair’s a gud movie comin’ on and I thought we moight wotch it together.”

“What movie?” Michele was taken aback. She’d never seen Paddy watching television and couldn’t imagine him watching a movie.

“Weell,” he said as he poured the drink over ice in tall glasses. “It’s an auld movie. Aboot a retoired boxer who comes ’ome t’ Ireland t’ seek ’is roots in ’is mother’s land. A vary entertaining piece o’ wark. One o’ yer American ’eroes. John Wayne and a most beeyootiful Irish lassie, Maureen O’Hara. A loverly tale indeed. Have ye nevar seen th’ Silent Man?”

“The silent man?!” Michele closed her Bible and laid it aside. “I see him every day.”

“Tis no joking matter, lassie.” Paddy eyed her closely with one eye closed. “Th’ boy will get a gud look at th’ Irish way o’ loife thot’s fadin’ even as we stand ’ere gabbin’.”

Marco stuffed his mouth with popcorn and looked at her expectantly. It was not often he was allowed to watch movies and he hardly ever got to eat popcorn and soft drinks were almost entirely forbidden except on very special occasions. Michele glanced down at Marco’s face and then nodded. The Silent Man may have been silent, but she remembered him as being a bit violent.

Paddy picked up the remote for the big screen television and began to punch the buttons with amazing dexterity. Michele was surprised again, but sat back on the sofa with her glass of soda as the opening titles of the old movie appeared on the screen exactly as predicted by the clurichaun. Paddy climbed onto the sofa beside Marco Niccolo and set the big bowl of popcorn between them. Very soon, they were totally immersed in the lively love story.

((((((((((((<O>))))))))))))

The house was very silent when Mark Andrew descended the stairs at eleven forty-five. His golden sword slapped the leather of his tall black boots as he walked across the entry hall to the library. He held his helmet under his arm with the heavy gloves hanging out of it. The library was dark and he could hear the sounds of the wolfhounds snoring peacefully on the hearth. The room still smelled faintly of the burned wood frame of the portrait that no one had removed from the fireplace and there was also the faint smell of popcorn in the air. He went to the desk and sat down in front of the computer.

There was one message on his e-mail from the Grand Master no less. He hadn’t thought to check his mail in days. Fortunately, it had been sent only this afternoon. It was very brief and no doubt sent by Armand de Bleu. The Master had less love for computers than Mark Andrew himself.

‘Make yourself available to the Council along with Dambretti as soon as possible after the work is accomplished. Urgent business to discuss. EdB.’

So he would be expected to accompany Lucio to Italy as well. He wondered if John Paul and Champlain would also be called. For that matter, he might want all of them, Merry included. If that was the case, Michele and Marco Niccolo would have to go as well. He would not leave them here with only the ancient gardener to protect them. He cleared the screen and looked up when Lucio and Simon entered the library.

It was strange seeing them again in uniform. It seemed that they had put the uniforms away for so long and now in the past few years they had worn them more than they ever had since the Order had fallen in the fourteenth century.

Lucio went immediately to turn on the television and then sat down on the sofa. His boots squeaked and his helmet fell to the floor with a thump. He put the television on the news channel and turned the volume down.

Simon advanced into the room almost hesitantly and came to stand beside the desk, looking quite lost.

“Brother.” Mark Andrew smiled up at him. “Pray for me. I think this may be quite taxing.”

“Of course,” Simon answered automatically, though he could not imagine how things could be worse than what he had experienced during the confession. To see all his sins played out before his mind’s eye had been most disturbing. He wondered how Mark Andrew had fared in that part of the ritual, but the Chevalier du Morte had seemed none-the-less for wear afterwards. Lucio, on the other hand, had been clearly distraught. Even now, the Italian seemed extremely nervous in spite of his feigned disinterest. He sat with one hand covering his eyes and his olive complexion looked a bit peaked.

“Mark Andrew!” Merry’s voice drifted down the stairs and into the library.

Mark Andrew closed his eyes. He was really worried. He’d refused to think about what this was all about until now and Simon’s expression did nothing to help him. Lucio looked really bad. The Scot stood up and looked at Lucio suspiciously as he passed. Did they know something he didn’t know? He paused by the door and put his helmet and gloves on. She had said full dress with helmets and gloves. Was she going to fight them or

cleanse them? Either way, it would be a hard battle for her to win in his case. Certainly, she would need divine help to cleanse him spiritually. The confession had been trying enough, but he had faced his demons before. It had only been a repeat of a very long-running silent film. He was just glad that she had been unable to see in his mind when he had confessed. He thought he had pulled it off quite well.

He stepped into the darkened hallway and looked up at her. She stood at the top of the stairs looking very much like the golden-haired woman he had seen at the seven-headed fountain in the abyss. She wore a long, white gown of loose fabric without sleeves, resembling the ancient Roman gowns he had seen in the murals painted on the walls of the villas in Italy. The dress was held by two golden clasps on each shoulder. She waited for him to ascend the stairs and then led him to her bedroom again. He would be very glad when all this over and they could be married and live happily every after. Ha! What a pleasant surprise that would be.

When they reached her bedroom, she had him sit down in one of the chairs and went to bring back a glass of wine. Red wine.

"Drink this," she told him simply and then leaned against the dresser. He looked about the room. There were no candles, no incense.

He turned up the glass and almost spilled it on his white surcoat.

"Here." She came to help him take off his gloves. The uniform was not well suited for cocktails and tea time. "That better?"

He nodded and turned up the glass to take a sip. He felt at a complete loss as she watched him drink. He was definitely reminded of the twenty-one years he had spent doing nothing but drinking.

"You're not nervous, are you?" she asked after a moment.

"Oh, not overly," he said and then frowned slightly. He could taste the herb in the wine. What was she up to? He looked at the glass and then at her. "Just curious."

"I see," she nodded, but said nothing more.

"I didn't expect to have cocktails with you," he said offhandedly, hoping for a bit more elaboration.

"What did you expect?" she asked him.

"I don't know," he shrugged and then finished off the small glass of wine. Get it over with. What was she going to do? Dance for him? "Maybe a dragon or two?"

"That's not funny."

“I know,” he said and set the glass on her bedside table. “No worries, lassie. The results are almost immediate.” He raised both eyebrows at her and her face turned red.

“I’m sorry,” she told him. “I figured you would know what it was.”

“I’m the alchemist.” He smiled ruefully.

“All right then.” She pushed herself off the dresser. “Let’s get on with it. In there.” She nodded toward the closed door to the bathroom.

“The dragon’s in there?” he asked as he stood up, but she did not laugh. Instead she came to push him toward the door.

Mark Andrew stopped in front of the tub full of hot water and turned to look at her as a dawning realization struck him. Cleansing? She was going to give him a bath! There was no doubt about it.

“Merry.” He took a step back, but she pushed him forward and then closed the door.

“I know what you’re thinking Mark Andrew, but you’ll just have to trust me,” she told him as she set about lighting the candles in the room. She lit the frankincense in the censer and then turned to face him. “Now all you have to do is follow my instructions and this won’t be difficult. It’s vitally important and cannot be omitted.”

“But why did you take me first?” he asked in consternation. “It would have been better if I had not known ahead of the others.”

“I expect you to be the least trouble,” she told him honestly.

“I see,” he said darkly.

“No you don’t,” she told him. “Now turn around.”

Mark Andrew turned to face her and she smiled once more before taking on a different expression he did not like at all.

“Now, take off your clothes,” she told him and raised her chin a bit as if to say ‘Don’t say a word.’

Mark Andrew grimaced and then reached up to remove his helmet. As he removed his clothes one piece at a time, he handed the pieces over to her and she laid them carefully across the wooden towel rack next to the tub. When he was completely exposed, she smiled just once and then took his hand.

“Now get in the tub.”

“Merry, ye’ll pay,” he muttered and then stepped quickly into the perfumed water. “This is not going to work with Simon, ye do realize.”

"Shhh," she told him as she stepped up on the small wooden footstool she used to get into the big tub. "Now be quiet and stand still."

She picked up the copper ladle and scooped up the first cup of water and raised it over his head.

"Be ye regenerate, cleansed, and purified, in the Name of the Ineffable, Great, and Eternal God," she poured the water on his head and he shuddered from head to foot. She scooped up more water from the tub to pour over his head. It ran in his face and his eyes and he stood blinking at her. He could not believe what was happening.

"…from all your iniquities, and may the virtue of the Most High descend upon you and abide with you always," she poured several more scoops of the fragrant water over his head until he was thoroughly soaked. "So that ye may have the power and strength to accomplish the desires of your heart. Amen."

"There!" she said and smiled broadly at him before stepping down from the stool. "That wasn't so bad, was it?"

He could not answer her. The water was still streaming from his hair and he felt totally lost. His mind was racing. Lucio might not mind this, but Simon!

"Merry," he said. It was all he could say.

"Shhh," she told him and handed him a fluffy white towel. "Now get dried off and dressed again. I have to get the water ready for Lucio."

"Oh, my God," Mark Andrew muttered and took the towel from her, eyeing the embroidered initials on the towel: LAD. A last reminder of who had taken over his household in the recent past. He stepped out of the tub and pressed the initials to his ass spitefully before smiling at her.

"Now Mark Andrew. Play nice," she admonished him. "Don't you say a word when you go downstairs. Do you understand?"

"Yes," he nodded curtly and dropped the towel in the hamper.

"And use the blow-dryer before you go. I don't want Simon upset before he comes in here." She pushed him toward the bedroom and then brought his clothes to the bed. She picked up a brass censer, a box of matches and a small bundle of the frankincense and stuffed them in his hands. "You will carry these to the circle. Be careful with them."

Before he could say anything more, she had closed the door between the bedroom and the bath, cutting off any further protest or questions. He could see himself in the mirror and the sight of his own naked body made

him blanch with embarrassment for just a moment. Not for himself, but for Simon. The Healer was in for the time of his life it seemed. Mark almost smiled as a series of small, but wicked thoughts ran through his partially demented brain. He didn't need the damned herb she had given him. He had already taken a counter measure to negate the effects. The stuff had side effects, chief among which was the slowing of reaction time and a mellowing of the temper. Simon would certainly benefit from the effects, but the last thing he needed or wanted was to lose his edge with the damned Italian lurking around every corner. Had the man not already tried to kill him once when he'd been in a weakened state? What would keep him from trying again?

He could hear her saying more prayers as he dried himself off, slapped the unruly part of his anatomy back in his trousers and pulled his surcoat over his head. He looked at himself again in her mirror and then crossed himself before picking up the blow-dryer. He well remembered the first time he had seen himself in a quality mirror dressed in the uniform of the Templar Knight. It had been most impressive at the time and he'd left the lady's boudoir with a noticeable swagger in his step the next morning, but that had been ages ago. His uniforms had collected enough blood since then to fill an Olympic swimming pool and the swagger had eroded to a slow plod, while the twinkle in his deep blue eyes had faded to something a bit less inviting. He cleared his throat and tugged at the chain mail surrounding his neck.

The entire ritual with Meredith had taken less than forty-five minutes and that included drinking the wine with the special herb in it. Now he understood perfectly why she had asked for it.

When he stepped in the hall a few minutes later carrying his 'special items' cradled carefully in his arms, he was surprised to find Paddy Puffingtowne sitting in an armchair outside her door. The clurichaun was dressed in his kilt and wore a red cap with the long, white feather in it. It was the same outfit he had worn after the ceremony of the Golden Key. The same outfit Mark Andrew remembered seeing when he had sat in the rain, in his own uniform, listening to the little fellow play his bagpipes. But instead of bagpipes, Paddy now held a rather wicked-looking short sword in his lap.

"Andy," Paddy nodded to him.

"Paddy." Mark returned the nod. "Whattar ye doin'?"

“Just sittin’ and thinkin’,” Paddy said casually. “Thinkin’ and sittin’.”

“Ahh.” Mark Andrew nodded. So Paddy was expecting trouble as well. “Air ye guardin’ th’ way in or th’ way out?”

“Booth and neither. Wottaver needs t’ be done, Paddy will do it.”

“Ahh.” Mark Andrew nodded again and the silver earrings jangled in his hair.

“Ye look moighty handsome in yer outfit, Andy.” Paddy eyed him closely. “But yer Ramsay red moight do ye a bit more justice.”

“Aye, I expect thot is true enough, but I’m doin’ wot I was told. Ye look moighty fine, yerself, friend,” Mark returned the unexpected compliment. “Do ye think ye moight need my assistance as it were?”

“I moight.” Paddy nodded. “Drag up a chair, me boy and we’ll have a noice sit.”

Mark Andrew went down the hall to his room, put his special items in the center of his bed and came back with a chair, which he placed next to the clurichaun. He sat in the chair, folded his arms across his stomach and stretched his legs out in front of him. They fell into an uneasy silence as they waited for the next chapter to unfold. They could faintly hear Merry’s voice filtering through the heavy door as she said the prayers and exorcisms over the water in the tub. Mark Andrew thought ruefully that she would have to work extra hard to exorcise the water she had washed him with. It had to be brimming over with sin.

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Al Hafiz reached up quickly to feel his hair under his turban. Again, it felt as if someone had poured water on top of his head. The sensation distinctly ran down his neck, his back, his chest, his legs. He glanced about at the other passengers on the crowded train and then removed his turban to look inside it. Dry. He looked up at the luggage rack above his head for leaks or perhaps a wayward chicken. Nothing. He hated public conveyances, but soon he would be at the airfield and his private jet would be waiting for him. The roads were flooded from the recent downpours and he had been unable to ride in the comfort of his limousine to the airport. The swampy land surrounding his compound was completely inundated.

The only thing running now were the trains. He was already in a bad mood and things were getting worse. He did not like being packed in so closely with all these unclean bodies. The stench of the common people overwhelmed him and the look on his face caused many who would have crowded next to him on the seat, to change their minds. He closed his eyes and another rush of warm water flowed over him. He actually blinked when he looked up again.

This was fascinating. He could actually smell perfume and frankincense. It was far better than the foul odors emanating from his fellow passengers and their goats, chickens, curry and other, far worse, things. He closed his eyes again and went over his plans in his head. Already things were set in motion in the west. The girl child in France had been located and that part of his plan put into action. The dark Knight had removed the boy from Romania. And the other child was in Switzerland as well. Things would be coming together soon, but it was very tedious work coordinating and planning everything in such unsettled times. Anything could go wrong. He was further distressed by his inability to determine which of the triplets would be the one to help him overthrow the Templars. He had falsely assumed that it would become quite obvious as they grew, but it had not become any clearer now than when they were new born. It was imperative that he keep them in sight and out of danger until he determined which one to take. He could have taken all three, but what would he do with three children? He had no use for children! It was difficult enough maintaining the daughter of Semiramis, but she would be essential to his plans.

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John Paul watched the water dripping from his long dark hair into his lap in fascination. He brushed the drops from his pants and then slung his hair about before reaching for the towel he had retrieved from the bathroom. He was too close to them. He glanced over at Michele who was sleeping soundly in the bed and then got up to let himself out into the hall.

He passed silently by his father and the clurichaun where they sat in chairs outside his mother's bedroom and continued on down the stairs to the

kitchen, ignoring them altogether. He felt their stares on the back of his head. Perhaps this would be better. He sat down at the table and rubbed the towel over his head. His shirt was soaking wet now. He leaned his head back and closed his eyes as he heard his mother's voice drifting down the hallway. She was calling the Knight of the Golden Eagle. A pain shot through his temples as one of the nine sorcerers screamed in his head. His mother's rituals had awakened this one. He sincerely hoped that the other eight would remain asleep. He heard the jingle of chain mail and the slap of leather against leather as Lucio Dambretti stomped up the stairs.

Lucio stopped at the top of the stairs and turned around, looking down at the prophet with a curious frown on his face. So many times they had passed on these same stairs and John was yet to speak to him as a normal person might. This time was especially poignant as the Italian wondered how many more times they would pass on Mark Andrew's stairs, wondering if this would be the very last time he ever climbed the stairs with Meredith's bedroom as his destination. His heart ached and his breathing became labored as the realization of all that he had lost crashed in on him once more. It was like losing someone to death again and again every time he saw her. There was always that certain rush that the sight of her face caused, but then it was always quickly followed by a pain worse than any he had ever suffered. She lived on… forever… in his memory as the woman of his dreams and the love of his life and yet, she was lost to him as eternally as the stars that burned every night in the black universe, bathing him in her light, but hopelessly out of reach. He cleared his throat, tugged on his belt and looked down at the water puddled on the risers. Had John Paul been carrying something leaky?

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"And that is your prognosis?" D'Brouchart stifled a yawn. The Ritter's phone call had awakened him from a sound sleep. Armand de Bleu sat in the chair in front of his desk. The Knight of the Throne's head drooped and his eyes were closed.

"Yes, your Grace," von Hetz' deep voice boomed in his ear.

"And you believe that an exorcism will cure him?" d'Brouchart asked doubtfully. He was of the opinion that, if the Ritter performed an exorcism on the boy, he would simply disappear altogether.

"The doctor here in Berne has some proposed treatment plans, but none of them have any relevance to the real problem at hand," von Hetz continued. "I believe that he has become possessed by some sort of spirit or more likely, a demon."

"I see." D'Brouchart rolled his stiff neck. "And where would you be taking him, if you move him from the hospital?"

"I haven't decided yet," von Hetz told him. "He is quite a handful they tell me and I have seen him in action. He is very destructive and completely uncontrollable without the restraints. I do not believe he is acting of his own accord."

"And how would you know that, Brother? Have you been able to see this?" d'Brouchart asked and stood up. He went to the small refrigerator and took out a bottle of spring water. De Bleu snored softly in the chair.

"I cannot look into his mind, your Grace," von Hetz admitted. The child's mind was even more obscured than John Paul's had been at the same age. The Ritter was actually afraid to look in on the boy's thoughts. The shock he had suffered when he had looked into Sir Philip's mind was still very fresh to him. The Knight of the Orient's magick had been powerful enough. He did not want to face whatever was in Joszef's mind without being prepared.

"I see," d'Brouchart said again and balanced the phone to uncap the bottle. He turned it up and took a long swallow. "I will pray on it, Brother. Let me know what you come up with and keep me posted on the boy's condition. Once you have a workable plan, we will discuss it in depth."

"It is all I can ask, your Grace," von Hetz said gratefully. The Grand Master had been more receptive to his plan than he had expected.

"Then peace be with you, Brother. Go with God," d'Brouchart muttered and shuddered.

"And you, Sir." The connection was broken.

The Grand Master sat frowning at the phone as if he had forgotten what it was. He glanced at the clock and wondered again how Sister Meredith's ritual was faring.

He leaned back in his chair and sipped the bottled water thoughtfully. So John Paul's son was the one. This latest report all but confirmed his

suspicions. He would allow the Ritter to attempt the exorcism, but only with assistance at the ready. The child, more like than not, would have to be destroyed. The Master held out little hope for the child and felt pain at the thought of dispatching him, but he had done worse for less cause. There were many things in his life that held only painful memories now. This would just be another in a long litany that he would try not to think about overlong. He had to let the Ritter try or else he would not have the Apocalyptic Knight's support when the final decision was wrought. He knew quite well that the boy looked exactly like his father had at the age of six and he knew how the Ritter must have felt when he looked at him.

Chapter Fifteen of Seventeen
let us lay wait for blood

Lucio paused outside Merry's door. She had not waited for him to come up the stairs after calling him, but had retreated back behind the closed door. He looked at Mark Andrew and then at Paddy before knocking lightly on the dark wood. What were they doing sitting in the hall? In the dark? What he could see of Ramsay seemed to indicate that the ceremony was not extremely debilitating. He almost looked as if he were asleep in the chair. He wore his helmet again and his head was down. His eyes were closed. Paddy looked up at him, but did not speak.

"Come in," he heard Merry's muffled voice through the heavy door.

With one last glance at the two watchers, he opened the door and stepped inside. Her scent overwhelmed him and brought back the pain in his heart. The bed was made with one of her favorite white and gold, goose-down comforters, inviting, very feminine and totally Meredith. Soft and sweet-smelling. He cleared the persistent frog from his throat again when she turned to face him.

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Mark Andrew sat up straighter and a deep frown marred his face when the door closed behind the Italian. He had thought it would not bother him so much, but he had been wrong. As soon as the doorknob clicked shut behind the Knight, he was up and pacing the hall. Paddy watched him in silence.

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"Please have a seat." Merry waved one hand at the chair beside her bed. "And take off your gloves."

Lucio looked around the room. There were no candles this time. No incense. He could smell only the lingering perfume of her bath. Vanilla with a hint of jasmine. He knew it well. He used to buy it for her. There was nothing of him in the room. She wore a long, white dress that reminded him of the statues of the Roman goddesses adorning the ruins of the temples in Rome. She was beautiful… as usual, but looked a little tired. He took the proffered seat and watched as she poured a small glass of wine from a crystal decanter into a matching goblet.

"Drink this," she said shortly as she handed him the glass. Red wine.

"Thank you, mia cara," he said automatically and then cringed at the faux pas. Mia cara. A name he'd not used for her since before Mark Andrew had returned. He felt extremely strange sitting in a chair in her bedroom, drinking wine with his full dress uniform on.

"After you finish the drink, we'll begin the cleansing ritual. All you have to do is follow my instructions. There will be no invocations or prayers for you to repeat. I assume that you are ready to get on with it?" she asked as he sipped the wine.

"Of course," he said and tried to smile. "I see my beloved Brother survived. Surely I can manage. Will I be standing or kneeling?"

"Standing." She leaned against the dresser and watched as he sipped the wine.

"Meredith," he said and then bit his bottom lip. "I'm sorry about losing our baby. I would never…"

"Shhhh," she put one finger against her lips.

He nodded and stared into the glass. His shoulders sagged.

"Meredith," he said again and looked up. "I will always love you no matter what you do. No matter what you think. No matter what I do. You will remember that, won't you?"

"It is hard to fathom sometimes," she muttered and then shushed him again. "Drink up, bambino, time's a'wastin'."

The bambino made him smile in spite of the pain in his heart. She never called him that unless he was depressed. She still loved him. He had no doubt. He turned up the glass and finished it off, then frowned slightly at

the glass and licked his lips. He didn't care for the wine. It had a funny aftertaste. Where there was love, there was hope.

"Basta," he said and stood up. "Get on with it."

"In there," she nodded toward the bathroom door. The same bathroom they had shared for seven years. The same tub. The same… he was still the same. Her heart ached for him, but he would never change. Never.

"In the bath?" he asked and stood perfectly still.

"Yes," she nodded. "Now go on." Merry chewed her bottom lip nervously.

Lucio raised his chin and made a face. He was clearly becoming highly suspicious. He took two steps toward the door and stopped. She prodded him in the back with her hands. "Go on."

"Why in the bath?" he asked, stubbornly refusing to move another step.

"Because this is the cleansing ritual," she told him lightly.

"And so I am second again?" he asked in amazement and turned to face her. The hurt evident in his eyes. The bath! It was the first place he had made love to her, but even then, when he had been hell bent on taking her from Mark Andrew, he had been second. Always second. Never first with her.

"Now, Lucio, this is not the same water! This is your own water and it has been freshly drawn, exorcised and perfumed," she explained and then sighed. "I know what you're thinking."

"Oh, do you?" he asked.

"Yes!" she snapped. "I'm sorry. I didn't think… I'm sorry, Lucio. I loved Mark Andrew first. I still love him, but you are forgetting something."

"And what is that, Sister?"

"I am the Master Magician and you are sworn to obey me. Now listen, you stubborn jackass! I love you. I will always love you. You are the father of my son and my daughter. You are with me always and I am with you. We will always have our memories and some of them are not so bad. Now get in there and take off that damned uniform!"

"What?" he asked and his frown deepened.

"I said take off your uniform," she said more softly and touched his cheek with one hand, running her fingers down the long scar, probably for the last time. "I promise not to take advantage of you."

He opened his mouth to speak and then his expression changed.

"Oh, of course," he nodded, turned and took two more steps, which put him in front of the bathroom door. She reached around him to open the door and pushed him inside.

The sweet smell of the bath oils struck him in the face and he flinched visibly. He had never expected to be in the bath with her again. He didn't think he was ready for this and then another, even more disturbing thought struck him and he spun around to take her by the shoulders.

"Merry! You're not going to bring Simon in here, are you?" he asked her urgently.

"Lucio, your main concern is what has to be done right now, right here," she told him sternly. "Now let go of me so I can light the candles."

He stood frozen in the middle of the room, watching her light the candles and then the incense.

"But Simon won't come in here, mia cara," Lucio muttered and shook his head when she looked up at him. "I know him! All this will be for nothing."

"Stop worrying about Brother Simon," she told him and reached up to take his helmet from his head. She laid it on the counter and reached for his belt buckle. He seemed to be quite paralyzed.

"But you will never be able to get him in that tub, Merry," Lucio continued almost oblivious to what she was doing. "I promise you. It just won't work."

"I seem to remember you thought otherwise not too very long ago, Lucio. What made you change your mind?" She removed his belt and his sword and dagger and laid them beside his helmet.

She was astounded that he was more disturbed now about Simon than he had been upset that she had given Mark Andrew a bath first. Perhaps he really had accepted the inevitability of their broken union.

"I was angry then," he said and looked down at her hands as she unfastened the clasp on his mantel. "I've come to realize many things since then. I have turned over a new leaf as they say. I am ready to go on with my life, such as it is." He could remember the last time a woman had taken his uniform off for him. She had been beautiful as well, but there had been the small matter of an arrow stuck in his back. Nothing romantic there.

"Oh?" She was glad for the small talk. It took her mind off what she was doing. She took his mantel from his shoulders while he stood rubbing

his hands together nervously.

"Yes. I believe that I have come to terms with things quite well now," he said and then held up his arms when she slipped his surcoat over his head. "I am not the hot-headed fool full of jealousy and envy that you once knew. I am ready to take responsibility for my actions and endure the consequences without complaint. I have already died twice. Once when I lost the baby and once trying to find her. I intend to go out this time better prepared and I intend to govern my actions with more control hence forward. I have had it with making rash and imprudent snap judgments that only end up complicating matters. I intend to see that she spends at least half her time with you. You see before you a new man." He held out his arms as if to model himself for her in his chain mail.

"How so?" she unbuckled the chain mail hauberk and he helped her take it off. She draped the hauberk over the towel rack.

"I have had a great awakening," he continued as she pulled his white, long-sleeved tunic shirt over his head, exposing the numerous hieroglyphs tattooed on his chest. "I am quite aware of my short-comings now and I plan to make a new start. I know that I've been a terrible husband to you, but I intend to do much better next time. When I find a new wife, I will make sure that she is treated with respect at all times. I will not be suspicious of her every move and will give her credit where I gave you none." He held up one leg and she pulled off a boot while he held onto her shoulders for balance. "I will treat her with kindness and loving consideration and she will have no reason to look for another man. There will be no fighting and no yelling and certainly not in front of the children or others. If only I had known what an awful person I was, we would still be together." He held up the other leg and she removed his other boot. He hopped on one foot and managed to take off one sock. "I am truly grateful to you for not hating me for losing Lucia Simone. I realize now how foolish it was to take her. You are a good woman, Meredith, and I have been an idiot. I have almost lost everything I held dear and I would not want to live without you and the rest of my Brothers. What a terrible life that would be. When this is over, I'm going to Italy to see the Grand Master and if he has decided to beat me to death with the rod for what I did, then so be it. It will be last time he will have occasion to look upon me with contempt. He said that he intends to expand my areas of responsibility and no matter what burden he places on me, I will accept it gladly and I will

not complain as I have done in the past." He took off the other sock and put them with his other gear and then he began to unbutton his brown woolen trousers. "I spent the time you gave me to meditate, talking these things over with God and I feel that He understands me now and that I understand Him more than ever before."

Merry could not turn around. She had to regain her composure and wipe the smile from her face. She had never heard Lucio speak like this before. Perhaps all of this would be worth it if for nothing else than to have Lucio reformed. She put on a somber face and turned to take his pants from him. As usual, he wore nothing more. She looked down at the scratchy pants in amusement and then did smile as she saw that his uniform had something hers did not. A satin lining. He raised both eyebrows and stopped talking when she looked at him and for just a moment, she thought he might take her in his arms and wondered what she would do if he did.

"I am glad to hear this, Brother," she said after a brief silence when he made no move to touch her. She sighed and turned her attention to folding his shirt and pants, allowing her heart to get back down to its proper place. She had to collect herself and resume the serious business associated with the Wisdom of Solomon.

"I am only sorry that it has taken me so long to come to truly know myself," he continued. "They say that suffering is good for the soul and so it is. I have suffered more in the past thirty or so years than I have in all my long existence prior to. It is no wonder that Mark Andrew is a better man than me. It is his suffering that has made him so."

Merry had to bite her lip to keep from smiling now. Lucio's voice still displayed his usual arrogance, but it was different somehow. He seemed to be displaying the arrogance against himself or his former self now rather than her or Mark Andrew.

"I have been self-centered and vain. Truly my father's son, no doubt. I want to speak more with Paddy Puffingtowne about my mother and I understand that Edgard d'Brouchart knew her as well. I would like to hear more about her. I have heard it on good authority that she was much like you and that pleases me immensely. Since she was my mother, then I would like to be her son. Surely there must be something of her in me and I intend to find it."

"An admirable goal," Merry told him as she laid his socks on top of his shirt. It seemed he had entirely forgotten what they were doing. That

was good, but she would have to get him to shut up so she could get on with the ritual before the sun came up.

"Furthermore," he looked up at the ceiling and crossed his arms over his chest. "I want you to know that…"

((((((((((((<O>))))))))))))

Mark Andrew was steadily growing more agitated. They could hear Lucio talking, but they could not make out the words. Mark had not talked nearly so much during the ritual! What on earth was Lucio saying? Was he making a confession to her? What was he griping and complaining about now? No doubt, he was giving her a hard time for having taken him second. Lucio hated being second. She should have taken the Italian first. It would have made no difference to him and it probably would have been better had he not known what they were doing in there just as he had told her. Why couldn't Lucio, for once, just shut up and do what he had to do without moaning and groaning. How could she endure his arrogance and his self-centered whining? He stopped in front of the door and pressed his ear against the wood.

"Now, Andy…" Padded tapped his shoulder with the blade of the short sword. "Go on."

Mark frowned at him and started pacing again. He would be a nervous wreck by the time Simon was done. What was he thinking?! He would be a basket case by the time Lucio came out! And what would the arrogant bastard say to him when he did come out? Probably something intolerable. He would just have to bear it. He would not be the one to bollix Merry's ceremony. She had worked too hard on it and they needed to know where the girl was, if they were planning on getting her back any time soon. And he wanted to get her back soon. It was in his own best interest as well as the Order's interests to have her returned to the fold. Meredith would be happy, he would be happy, the Grand Master would be happy. Those were the only three people he was concerned with at the moment. He wanted to take over his duties at the chapel again and let John Paul get on with whatever it was he was supposed to be doing.

The first thing he would do when it was all settled was clean out all the fancy trappings in his chapel and get things back to normal. John Paul could no longer carry on as a priest for the local gentry. They would notice very soon that their priest had stopped aging. He had been through this same problem many times himself. It was no small trick to keep regenerating a new identity with the same face that was convincing enough to keep the local residents out of his hair. He'd even gotten some of his ideas from the old vampire movies he had watched with Dambretti. Vampires! Merry was in there with a naked vampire. Lucio would suck the very life out of her with all his senseless chatter, whining and bitching. And he was going to wear out his boots tramping up and down the hall.

((((((((((((<O>))))))))))))

Merry laid the last piece of Lucio's clothes across the towel rack and turned around to face him. He was still talking. She waited for him to pause and then raised both eyebrows. He looked down at himself, frowned at his clothes draped across the towel rack and then suddenly reached out toward her. With no effort, he popped the two golden clasps on the shoulders of her gown and it fell to the floor, leaving her totally naked.

She shrieked in surprise and bent to grab up the gown, clasping it to her in shocked horror.

"What?!" he exclaimed in alarm and looked about in confusion. "We are going in the tub, no?"

((((((((((((<O>))))))))))))

When Merry shrieked, Mark Andrew bounded to the door and put his hand on the doorknob. Paddy was up in an instant with the sword pressed against the small of his back. Mark Andrew froze and then turned on the little fellow with a terrible look on his face.

"Don't tempt me, little mon!" Mark Andrew told him ominously and then turned back to the door.

Paddy slapped him on the ear with the flat of the blade and Mark spun on him again pressing one hand against his ear in amazement.

"Did ye not hear, mon?!" he asked the clurichaun. "Merry's in trouble."

"Oh, nooo. Merry's not in tribble, Andy, but ye'll be in tribble if ye don't get away from thot door." Paddy took a step back and frowned at him fiercely. He had expected trouble, but not this.

"Don't bother me!" Mark told him and turned back to reach for the doorknob again.

Paddy put two fingers in his mouth and whistled. He stuck out one foot and swept the Knight of Death off his feet. Mark Andrew fell in a heap on the floor, banging his head against the door as he fell.

"Dammit, mon!" Mark pulled himself up and then drew his sword from the sheath. "Don't make me hurt ye."

"Come on with yer best, Andy," Paddy raised the short sword and stepped back raising his chin determinedly. His blue eyes veritably glowed in the dim light of the wall sconces.

((((((((((((<O>))))))))))))

"What was that?" Lucio asked as Merry hurriedly refastened the clasps on her gown. He was awkwardly trying to help her regain her composure, totally embarrassed now by his faux pas. She slapped his hand away. He'd entirely forgotten what they were there for and for just an instant, he had thought himself into the past. Taking baths with Merry had been one of his favorite pastimes after a long day making gold in Mark's lab. "Was that a whistle?"

"I don't know," she told him irritably. "Now get in the tub and stand still."

Lucio let out a sigh and stepped into the hot water. It made his feet tingle. Merry climbed onto the top step and hurriedly scooped up a ladle full of the fragrant water and poured it over his head. It puddled on his thick, curly hair and ran off like water on a duck's back unlike Mark's silky locks. She would have to rub it in. She had to lean forward and scruff up his hair with her fingers. He closed his eyes and made a face. She thought

he might actually start weeping at any minute. Something she had never expected. His plight was not lost on her and she wondered if Mark's 'special herb' had perhaps affected him in some unexpected manner. If he was unable to join the circle, her plans would have to be scrapped.

Lucio felt his knees quaking as the water dripped on his shoulders and ran down his body. He didn't like water in his face. He blew the water in her face and she slapped his shoulder, lost her balance and almost fell into the tub with him. She shrieked again and he grabbed her arms to keep her from falling.

"Sorry, mia cara," he muttered and let go of her.

"Be still," she said and scooped up another dipper of water.

"Sorry," he shrugged and apologized again.

She began the cleansing prayer and Lucio shuddered as the hot water poured over his head and into his face, trying hard to resist the urge to spray her again.

((((((((((((<O>))))))))))))

Mark Andrew was appalled at the foolhardiness of the clurichaun. He didn't have time for this. Merry had shrieked a second time and now there was nothing but silence from the room behind him. Merry needed his help. That much was obvious. There was no doubt that Lucio had done something terrible to her in a fit of jealous rage. The Italian was unpredictable. He should have known this would happen. He well remembered the beating Louis Champlain had given Lucio not long ago for attacking her.

He raised his sword a bit and Paddy struck the first blow. Mark parried it easily and stared at the short man in disbelief.

Paddy attacked him again and he fell back.

"Paddy! Stop it!" he told the clurichaun sternly. "Stop it right now!" he choked up and his voice raised two octaves in desperation. "Ye don't understand."

Paddy slapped his ankle with the flat side of the blade and Marked yelped in surprise. His boot took most of the sting out of the blow, but it shocked and stung him that Paddy would actually attack him.

"Put yer swoard away, Andy, and sit down," Paddy told him forcefully.

"Ye canna be serious." Mark Andrew jumped aside again as Paddy swung at him.

Mark Andrew edged away from the wall and stepped into the center of the hall, only to be scooped up by John Paul and carried bodily down the length of the hall where he was dumped unceremoniously on the floor.

"Good God!" Mark Andrew pushed himself up. "Whattar ye doin', John Paul?!"

"Papa!" John Paul's voice held a warning note. He held one hand out to his father and helped him up.

Mark Andrew straightened his uniform angrily and then put his sword back in the sheath. He glared up at his son and then walked stubbornly back to Merry's door.

"I'm going in there to make sure everything is all right," he said slowly, trying to control his temper as he placed his hand on the doorknob again. How dare they try to stop him? This was his house and Merry was his woman and she was in there with a naked man!

"Oh, nooo ye're not!" Paddy told him and John Paul tackled him again. This time they slid down the hall, almost to the top of the stairs before stopping. The back of his head cracked against the banister. His skull was saved only by his helmet. Now he was truly angry. He got up a bit more slowly and stood facing the larger version of himself dressed in black.

"Papa?" John Paul's voice took on a pleading tone.

"Papa! I'll papa ye, John Paul. Step aside." Mark Andrew was no longer thinking at all. He had only one thought now. He lowered his head and blinked rapidly at his son. "Don't make me hurt you."

"Papa!" John Paul stepped back and Mark Andrew started around him. John Paul shot out one foot and sent him sprawling in the floor again.

Mark Andrew pushed himself up and let go a string of Gaelic that made Paddy cover both his ears with his hands. He charged into the prophet with his head and John Paul side-stepped him neatly, allowing him to jam his head into the banister. Mark Andrew grabbed his helmet from the floor and put it back on his head. He turned over slowly on his back and then pushed himself up again. Were they both crazy? Merry needed his help! He stood up again and John Paul stepped in front of him.

“Out o’ th’ way, boy!” Mark told him in a low voice.

“No, Papa!” John Paul reached out and shoved him back against the railing almost effortlessly.

“I’m yer father, John Paul! Now stand aside!” he raised his voice and straightened up. John Paul shook his head and Mark Andrew threw a punch at his jaw. John Paul ducked and caught his father’s arm. He twisted it slightly and then applied enough pressure to put him back on the floor before releasing him again. Mark Andrew could not believe this. It was outrageous, it was.

He took hold of the railing and pulled himself up again. Before he got all the way up, John Paul took him by the shoulders, spun him around and rammed his head into the wall by the stairs. His son tried to stand him on his feet, but he was knocked completely senseless, helmet notwithstanding.

“Just put ’im in th’ chair,” Paddy told the distraught prophet. John Paul carried his father to the chair and they propped him up in it. His chin sagged on his chest and he was out.

“He’ll be oll roight now,” Paddy chuckled and shook his head. “Stay put, I’ll be roight back.”

((((((((((((<O>))))))))))))

“Here you go,” Merry said as she handed Lucio a small black notebook, a pen and two bottles of perfumed oil. “You will take these things to the circle. Be real careful with them.”

Lucio looked down at the stuff and then laid them on the bed before ruffling his curly wet hair with the towel.

“And use the blow-dryer. I don’t want Simon getting upset before it’s necessary,” she told him and hurried back to the bathroom. “I have to draw his bath and exorcise the water. Actually, I was supposed to do this to all three of you at once, but I didn’t think it was a good idea.”

“No. I think this way is better.” Lucio frowned and then began to get dressed. “I wonder what all the noise was about.”

“I can’t imagine!” Merry called from the bathroom. “It sounded like a chair fell over or something.”

"Your Scot was asleep out there. Maybe he fell out of his chair," Lucio told her as pulled on his hauberk and adjusted the fasteners. "Will we need our helmets and gloves for the circle?"

"Yes. Please." Merry came out of the bathroom and stood on tiptoe to kiss him lightly on the cheek. "Thank you, Lucio. I appreciate your cooperation. I was a bit worried at first…"

"I'm sure you were, but you will see a new me from now on, Sister." He smiled at her. "Sorry about the gown. I thought you were going to get in the tub with me."

"I know. It's all right," she told him. "I hope this next part goes well."

Lucio drew a deep breath and then sat down in the chair to pull on his boots.

"Simon's not going to like it," he added. "All I can say is better you than me."

"No, it'd probably work much better if it was you doing it," she laughed softly. "Remember, all these things were designed for men. The master of the ceremony has always been a man. I never realized that men did such things as give each other baths. It seems a bit…"

"Strange," he agreed. "I think I like it better this way. I couldn't imagine having someone like Louis Champlain give me a bath."

Merry laughed again. The experience with Lucio had gone a long way to restoring her mentally and physically and she was grateful for the respite. It had almost been fun, but she had to remember the gravity of the situation and keep her perspective in the proper place. Mark Andrew's herb had worked quite well, it seemed. She glanced at the clock. It was almost three AM. Time was flying now. The sun would be up at six. She still had to get past this thing with Simon and then they had to go over to the chapel and enter the circle.

"Go on now," she told Lucio as he picked up the blow-dryer on the dresser and looked at it as if it were an alien weapon. "Don't forget your things and send Simon up when you go down. Hopefully, we'll be done in another hour and ready to go."

She closed the door between them as he turned on the dryer. He looked at his reflection in the mirror and was greatly relieved that the cleansing had been so simple. No memory flashes, no guilt trips, but Simon…

“Santa Maria,” he muttered and shook his head and then began to whistle though he could not hear it above the sound of the dryer. Simon was in for a surprise all right.

((((((((((((<O>))))))))))))

Al Hafiz had finally settled into the comfortable sofa on his private jet and was just dozing off when he heard a shriek. A woman’s shriek. He sat up again and looked around the empty cabin. Dreaming already? But he hadn’t gone to sleep yet, had he? He shook his head and ran his fingers through his short dark hair. His fingers came away wet. He felt water running down his neck under his collar and he stood up quickly. What was this? The same feeling he had experienced on the train, only this time, there was real water on his head and his hands.

Some kind of magick. Someone was toying with him again. He sat back down and closed his eyes, trying once more to reach Semiramis. The ritual magick she was engaged in was growing stronger with each passing hour. Perhaps this had something to do with what she was doing. He could not find her. She was still veiled from him. She had not kept the ring on her finger. That much was certain. He had made a connection with her, but it was too weak to control properly. He would need more time with her and he intended to have it.

((((((((((((<O>))))))))))))

Edgard d’Brouchart had barely gone back to sleep when de Bleu was beating on his door again. Another phone call?

The voice on the other end of the phone was French. One of the priests of the Order from Paris. He was speaking rapidly and in a great state of agitation. D’Brouchart held up one hand to the young, dark Knight forbidding him from sitting in the chair in front of the desk. This was no time for the Knight of the Throne to go to sleep.

D'Brouchart listened to the man with growing alarm. His granddaughter was in the custody of the police. There had been an accident. Her parents were dead. A terrible crash. The child was lucky to have survived. What should he do?

"Bring the child to the Villa," d'Brouchart told the excited priest. "I will make the calls necessary to have her released to your custody."

More excited speech.

"It's not difficult, Father." D'Brouchart looked at de Bleu and shook his head. "Just give her plenty of candy and keep her close to you. Simple."

Another round of desperate questions.

"Of course! Bring her clothes and whatever else she wants to bring. Armand de Bleu will be listening for your call… and Father, be very careful!"

The Master punched the button on the phone, ending the call.

"What is it, your Grace?" De Bleu was wide awake now. The look on the Master's face frightened him.

"The child Oriel. Her parents have been killed in an automobile accident," d'Brouchart answered and narrowed his eyes. Such things were common enough in this day and age. Even the Princess of Wales had been killed in an accident such as this in Paris. The driving conditions there were atrocious, but there could have been other powers at work. Lucio had also been run down by an automobile when his daughter had been abducted. "Get Bishop Navarre on the phone for me, Brother. And put in a call to the Ritter. Also, go and fetch Barry to see me and send an e-mail to Scotland. Tell Simon to call me as soon as he can."

"Yes, your Grace."

De Bleu took the phone from the Master and hurried away.

Now they would have another problem. What would they do with a six-year-old girl? Adoptive parents were much less abundant for older children. And the special circumstances surrounding this particular child made it impossible to just farm her out to a private boarding school or some such. D'Brouchart needed expert advice and he needed it quickly. He got up and hurried after de Bleu. He caught him near the pool.

"Send a message to Dame Meredith. Tell her that her presence is requested… nay, commanded here as soon as possible. Tell her to bring the boy along."

“Yes, your Grace,” de Bleu nodded and left the Master standing at the pool. He stared at the sparkling surface for a few minutes and then pulled his shirt over his head and plunged into the sparkling cool water, allowing it to envelope him in its cold comfort. He floated to the surface, rolled on his back and floated motionless, staring up at the velvet black sky and the brilliant points of light studding its vast expanse, as if searching for God’s face among the greatest wonders of His creation.

((((((((((((<O>))))))))))))

Lucio opened the door and stepped into the hall. He was surprised to see John Paul sitting on the floor, with his back against the wall. Paddy still sat in his chair by the door and Mark Andrew was still sleeping in the chair beside him.

“Brother,” Lucio nodded to John Paul and the prophet smiled up at him.

“Wud she be ready fer Pierre now?” Paddy eyed him curiously.

“She would,” Lucio told him and leaned down slightly to peer at Mark Andrew’s face under his helmet. How could he sleep like that at a time like this? He was sure to have a crick in his neck. “But I doubt he’s ready for her,” he muttered under his breath.

“Go on now, Lucky, and foind yerself a chair. We moight as well keep each other comp’ny.”

Lucio nodded and clunked down the stairs to find Simon. Paddy got up and went to knock lightly on Louis Champlain’s door. The big Frankish Knight opened the door and blinked at him sleepily.

“Ye’d best come on out here with us, Louie,” Paddy told him. “We moight need ye’re sarvices before it’s over. And… bring a chair. This moight take some toime.”

Louis nodded and closed the door.

He came out shortly, yawning and lugging a heavy armchair and a big, fluffy pillow. He set the chair down beside Mark Andrew and sat down on the pillow. He leaned over to look at the Knight’s face.

“He’s going to have a crick in his neck, sleeping like that at a time like this, no?” Louis commented.

“Oh, fer sure, ’e will.” Paddy agreed. “But I think I ’eard ’im say to leave ’im be. Didn’t ’e say thot, Johnny?”

“Aye,” John Paul nodded.

Paddy reached into one of his deep pockets and pulled out a packet of bubble gum.

“Gum, anyone?” he asked and passed out sticks to John Paul and Louis before taking one for himself. He sighed at Mark Andrew’s inert form, smacking loudly. “Tis gud exercise fer th’ teeth,” he announced and the two Knights agreed.

Chapter Sixteen of Seventeen
I also will laugh at your calamity

Simon d'Ornan climbed the stairs lightly, humming a tune under his breath. His sword slapped against each riser as he ascended to the second floor, a problem he had always suffered with the full length broadsword, but he had never complained, fearing that his taller Brothers would tease him. He held his helmet under his arm and his gloves clasped in his left hand. He stopped on the top step at the sight of the four people in the hallway outside Merry's bedroom door. Lucio bounded up the stairs behind him.

"Excuse me, Brother."

Lucio brushed past him and hurried away to his room for a chair.

Simon walked slowly down the hall and stopped in front of the door, where he stalled long enough to put on the helmet and gloves. He nodded to John Paul and the prophet nodded back. Paddy looked up at him and winked. Louis Champlain met his gaze without blinking, chewing his gum thoughtfully.

"Brother, a fine evening to you," the Frankish Knight's voice echoed in the hall.

"Louis," Simon said the man's name solemnly. What were they doing? He leaned down a bit to look at Mark Andrew. He was asleep! At a time like this?! Simon tucked an errant strand of blonde hair under his helmet then turned to knock on the door.

"Come in," Merry's muffled voice called from behind the door.

Simon put his hand on the doorknob and then glanced once more at the small audience. It smelled like bubblegum in the hall. He paused as Lucio came trundling down the hall, carrying a footstool. The Knight of the Golden Eagle plopped the stool on the floor beside John Paul and sat down. He frowned at Louis when the big Knight blew a tremendous bubble and then popped it loudly.

"Come in!" Merry's voice was a bit louder this time.

Simon opened the door and stepped inside cautiously.

Merry was pouring a glass of wine at the dresser. She looked back at him and smiled.

"Please have a seat, Brother," she told him and picked up the crystal goblet. "You can remove the helmet and gloves."

Simon looked around the room as if he expected something horrible to leap on him any second. Coming into to her bedroom thus attired was very disturbing.

"Why are they in the hall?" he asked as he sat down stiffly in the chair.

"Who?" she asked innocently as she handed him the glass. She took his helmet and gloves and laid them on the bed.

"Never mind."

He took the glass and turned it up, draining the small glass immediately, without question, without consciously acknowledging the action. The sweet wine made him shudder and he made a face.

"Well, that was fast," she smiled and then bit her bottom lip. He was so nervous, his face was very pale. "Would you like another glass?"

"No." He shook his head. "No, thank you."

"Then we might as well get started," she said. "You won't have to repeat any prayers or confessions for this rite."

"I see," he nodded and swallowed hard.

"I will do all the talking. All you have to do is follow my instructions and this will take… oh, maybe thirty minutes," she explained and glanced at the clock hopefully. It was fifteen after three. If she could get him out by a quarter to four, she would have plenty of time to get ready and take them to the chapel. There were still the suffumigations and the prayers and the circle…

Simon was nodding his head. He was trying to remember what Paddy had told him. Draw on your past experiences? Was that what the clurichaun had said? Merry looked radiant in the white gown. The presence of his Brothers just outside the door made him extremely edgy. Why were they out there? What were they waiting for? You'll need all your fortitude. Paddy had said that, too. Keep the proper perspective. Simon nodded to himself.

"Now, stand up," Merry told him and reached to take his hand. He was cold as ice and he didn't have a clue… yet. "In here." She began to walk backwards toward the bathroom, drawing him along in front of her. Simon allowed her to pull him along a few steps and then leaned to see where they were going.

He stopped.

"Why are we going in there?" he asked in a very low voice and glanced back at the door.

"That's where we're going to perform the ritual cleansing," she told him lightly.

"Oh."

He allowed her to open the door, but when he saw the candles and smelled the perfumed water and the frankincense. He stopped again.

"Are you sure this will be all right?"

He looked back at the door again.

"Don't worry, Brother," she told him. "No one is going to disturb us. Mark Andrew and Lucio did just fine. There's nothing to it."

He stepped inside the bathroom and looked down at the water in the tub, frowning.

"Are you going to pour water on me?" he asked suspiciously as she closed the door.

"Yes." She went to light another lump of frankincense and put it in the censer. "And don't worry. That water is especially for you. It's not… used."

"Oh," Simon nodded and then objected, "But my uniform will be ruined. That won't be good for the ceremony, will it?"

"No it won't be ruined," she said and turned to face him forcing her soft features into a sterner look. "You won't be wearing it."

"I won't?" He stood blinking at her. "How so?"

"You're going to take it off," she ordered. "Now."

"No, I'm not," he shook his head slowly.

"Yes, you are," she said. "You have to. It's part of the ritual. I am the Master Magician. You are sworn to obey me."

"No, it can't be," he said adamantly and backed up and bumped the steps leading to the tub. "I am sworn to obey," he added in a lower voice.

"Yes, you are," she told him a bit more seriously.

"I can't do this! I am sworn to obey," he repeated and looked about in panic before making a dash for the door. He flung it open and tried to make it to the bedroom. Merry grabbed his mantel and yanked back on it. His feet left the floor and he fell flat on his back on the rug.

"Oh, God, Simon!" Merry gasped and knelt beside him. He was supposed to obey her. Somehow, he was overriding her magick. "I didn't

mean to do that."

((((((((((((<O>))))))))))))

Lucio turned his head slowly and watched in fascination as John Paul blew an even bigger bubble than Louis Champlain.

"Pardon me, Brother, could you spare a stick of gum for me?" he asked.

John shook his head solemnly and pointed one finger at the clurichaun who was half hidden behind his own enormous, multicolored bubble.

Paddy nodded and handed Lucio a stick of gum. The Italian watched in amazement as Louis blew an equally large bubble. He was about to put his own stick in his mouth when all three bubbles burst in rapid succession and Simon crashed to the floor inside Meredith's room, causing him to flinch.

Mark Andrew jerked his head up at the combined sounds and slapped one hand on the hilt of his sword. He started out of the chair and Louis held his arm out in front of him. He hit the big Knight's arm which had the same effect as throwing himself against a tree limb and slammed back against the chair.

"Stay put, Brother," Louis told him as he sat shaking his head in confusion.

Mark blinked and looked about in the dim light. Lucio sat across the hall on a low footstool, calmly chewing his gum. Mark pushed himself up straight in the chair and glared at the Italian.

"Brother, welcome back," Lucio said quietly and nodded to him.

"Wottaver are ye doing? Chewing gum at a toime loike this?!" he asked.

Mark frowned and leaned back in his chair. John Paul also sat across the hall. It was obvious that he was outnumbered here and apparently everything was all right now. If Lucio had hurt Merry, surely he wouldn't be sitting there on the footstool looking so calm and serene, chewing gum. He straightened his helmet on his head and tugged on his hauberk. His neck hurt and he reached up to rub the crick. How long had he been out? He checked his sword and picked his gloves up off the floor.

His head hurt. He looked at the clurichaun and Paddy winked at him, offered him a stick of gum and returned his gaze to the ceiling as he blew another gigantic bubble.

Mark was mesmerized as he slowly reached for the proffered gum.

((((((((((((<O>))))))))))))

"Sister, I'm sorry," Simon apologized and allowed her to help him up. She pushed him back to sit in the chair and knelt in front of him.

"Simon." She looked into his eyes. "You can do this. It's not as bad you think. After all we've been through together, this is child's play. Now just think of me as your sister."

"Sisters are still women," Simon complained. "I wouldn't take off my clothes in front of my sister even if I had a real one."

"I am your real sister, Simon," she told him. "Now think! What will Lucio and Mark Andrew think if you ruin this ceremony?"

"What will they think if I don't?" he countered. No wonder they were sitting in the hall!

"They have already been in here. They know what it's about. They will understand. They trust you implicitly," she pleaded with him.

"I don't know," he said. "Can't we just skip this and pretend we did it. Or just pour it on my head."

"No. Puh-leeease?" She looked up at him with her best pout.

Simon stood up and looked at the bathroom door.

Merry got up and took his arm. "The water is getting cold."

She walked him to the door again and he stopped.

"I can't," he shook his head.

"Come on. How will it look if I can't even perform one function of my Mystery?" she asked him, trying to find another approach that might work. Pleading had failed. "And how will your Brothers look at you if you run out of here like a coward?"

"I am no coward!" He looked at her with a bit of anger in his eyes and stepped into the bathroom again.

"I won't touch you," she told him. "You just take your clothes off any way you feel like it and we'll get this done. You'll be out of here in no

time."

Simon nodded. His pale face was now accentuated by a deep red flush on his cheeks.

He took off his mantel and she put it on the towel rack. He took off his belt and his sword and his dagger and handed them to her, very slowly. Reaching under his chain mail, he removed a bottle of water, a pack of crackers and an antique, silver skeleton pocket watch out of his secret pouches. She laid them on the counter, amazed that he had all these things hidden in his uniform. He had pockets! Furthermore, he carried a pocket watch. She didn't have pockets in her uniform. She made a mental note to add some. He pulled his surcoat over his head and handed it to her. She laid it over the mantel. He took off his hauberk and dropped it on the floor. They both reached for it and banged their heads together painfully.

"Ow! Ow!" He pressed his hand against his forehead while she rubbed her head.

((((((((((((<O>))))))))))))

Lucio looked up and frowned at Mark Andrew.

He'd heard Simon. What was she doing to him?

"Did you hear that?" Lucio looked at John Paul and the prophet shrugged slightly.

"I heard it," Mark Andrew told him and cast a dark glance at Louis. "Did you hear it?"

"I didn't hear anything but gum smacking, Brother," Louis shook his head.

"Stop yer frettin', boys," Paddy told them and tapped the point of his short sword on the toe of his shoe. "Leave 'em be."

Mark nodded and made an attempt at a bubble, blowing his gum across the hall. John Paul caught it and his father shrugged apologetically. Paddy offered him another stick.

((((((((((((<O>))))))))))))

Merry laid the hauberk on top of his helmet on the counter. He was having trouble with his boots. Merry offered him her hand and he leaned on her arm and reached down to try to pull off the tight-fitting boot. It would not budge.

"Here, sit on the floor and I'll pull it off," she suggested.

Simon sat down and Merry pulled and tugged on the boot. When it finally came off, she fell backwards into the vanity cabinet, slamming her back against the wood, flinging the boot in the air.

"Look out!" Simon shouted at her as the boot came down narrowly missing her head.

Merry let go a small shriek and then laughed at the ridiculous scene. Simon tried hard not to laugh as he tugged on his other boot. He got the second boot off with much less trouble.

((((((((((((<O>))))))))))))

"I heard that!" Louis frowned. "It sounded like something heavy."

"She's laughing!" Mark Andrew stood up suddenly and Louis grabbed the back of his uniform to pull him back down.

"Why would she be laughing, Brother?" Lucio also stood up and John Paul pushed himself up as well.

"I don't know," Mark answered. "She didn't laugh when I was in there."

"She didn't laugh at me either," Lucio said and held up one hand for them to be quiet.

((((((((((((<O>))))))))))))

Merry got back up with Simon's help and tried to regain her composure.

Simon's laughter had faded quickly as he looked down at himself. He was down to his pants, his socks and his undershirt.

He pulled off his socks and his hands began to shake.

"Sister," he said softly. "I don't think I can go any further."

He started for the door and she grabbed his tee shirt yanking him back again. This time he caught hold of the door frame with both hands.

"Let go, Merry!" he shouted at her, forgetting the audience in the hall. "Let go!"

"No!" she hissed and yanked on the shirt brutally. She should have had Mark make some of his honey potion for them, but then she didn't want the Healer drunk when they performed the ritual.

He dragged her into the bedroom and then let the shirt slip off over his head. Once again she lost her balance and crashed onto the floor banging the bathroom door against the wall with a tremendous boom.

((((((((((((<O>))))))))))))

Mark Andrew stood up yet again and side-stepped Louis's reach. Paddy leaped over the arm of the chair and stood in front of Merry's door. Looking up at him with the tip of the sword pointed at his chin.

"Back off, mon!" Paddy told him and Lucio took his arm.

"Let it be, Brother," Lucio told him. "If he needs us, he'll call us."

"If he needs us! What about Merry?" Mark Andrew looked at Lucio in amazement and then frowned.

"That was Merry laughing!" Lucio reminded him. "That was Simon telling her to let go."

"Oh." Mark Andrew backed up. "Sorry."

They all settled back into their chairs, looking at each other, chewing their gum nervously.

((((((((((((<O>))))))))))))

"I'm sorry, Merry." Simon knelt beside her. "Are you all right?"

"Yeah, sure." Merry sat up, rubbing the side of her head this time. If this kept up, she would not be able to walk to the chapel, much less perform

the ceremony. He helped her up.

"Now come on, Simon." She dragged him back to the bathroom. "Look the candles are burning down and we're running out of time. We're almost there. How bad can it be?"

"Bad," he said. He was shaking visibly now.

"Look," she said brightly. "I have an idea. Turn around."

He turned his back on her.

"I'll show you how easy this is," she said. "Now turn around."

He turned around and she stood before him with nothing on. Her gown lay on the floor.

"See?" She held out her arms. "Nothing to it."

Simon's mouth fell open and to her great astonishment he covered his eyes and began to scream.

"No! No! Stop it, Simon!" She grabbed his arms and tried to pull his hands from his face. "Look! Look at me, Simon!"

((((((((((((<O>))))))))))))

Mark and Lucio were up again and this time John Paul had to tackle both of them and it took both the priest and Louis Champlain to hold them on the floor.

"Get off me!" Lucio shouted at Champlain who had sat down on his back. He tried to elbow the big man in the ribs.

John Paul had used a trick that Mark Andrew had taught him. He now held his father down with one knee strategically placed in his midsection with his forearm across his neck. Not quite as bad as a sword across his neck, but he had no breath left to protest.

Champlain took a handful of Lucio's curly hair and pulled his head back.

"One more move and I'll smash your nose, Brother."

"Tsk, tsk," Paddy clucked, shaking his head at this development and slapped the blade of his sword in the palm of his hand.

((((((((((((<O>))))))))))))

“No, no, no, no, no!” Simon would not uncover his eyes.

“Simon.” Merry leaned close to his face. “How on earth do you plan to ever get married if you’re terrified to get naked with a woman?”

“You don’t understand,” he moaned and moved his hands away from his eyes incrementally, but kept his eyes squeezed shut.

“Open your eyes, dammit!” she said angrily and then crossed herself quickly.

He complied instantly and stood blinking at her.

“Now the pants!” she said in the same tone. She had forgotten! She should have just commanded him to do it all along. It seemed that the Healer simply needed a sterner approach.

He unbuttoned his pants and took them off.

“Now the rest!” she told him and he complied slowly. She took his underwear and threw them haphazardly at the towel rack.

He still wore one thing. A single, braided cord around his waist.

She put one finger under it and he screamed again.

((((((((((((<O>))))))))))))

Paddy picked up his bagpipes and put the pump under his arm. He drew a deep breath and began to play the song Simon had been singing in the cellar. Mark Andrew tried again to raise his head and John Paul pushed him back down.

Lucio relaxed a bit under Louis and he let go of his hair.

((((((((((((<O>))))))))))))

Simon stopped screaming and looked up at the ceiling as Merry untied the knot in the cord.

“All right. That’s it,” she said. Her heart was beating very fast. He had scared her to death and she was half exhausted by all the tumbling

about on the floor and pushing and shoving and tugging. “Now get in the tub.”

Simon backed up the steps and stepped in the water. The sound of Paddy’s pipes drifted into the room and the Healer continued to stare up at the ceiling while she poured water over him. He didn’t seem to mind if she poured the water directly in his face. In fact, he kept his eyes wide open the entire time.

As she began to say the words of the rite, he began to sing in Latin. She paused, completely surprised by his reaction. His voice was very fine, if a bit wavery at first, gurgling a bit. She scooped more water and continued with the chant while he continued with the song. Whatever it was, it was beautiful.

((((((((((((<O>))))))))))))

“Santa Maria!” Lucio said quietly when he heard Simon singing. He hadn’t heard the priest sing that song in countless years.

“Now whattar they doin’?” Mark Andrew pushed on John Paul’s arm.

“Oll right, me boys. Promise t’ be good now and these fine fellows will let ye up,” Paddy told them.

“I promise, for God’s sake!” Lucio said through gritted teeth. “Just get off me! I’m suffocating here.”

“Papa?” John Paul leaned down to look at his father’s face. Mark Andrew nodded and John Paul let him go.

Lucio and Mark Andrew picked themselves up, dusted themselves off and stood looking at each other in consternation as Simon’s voice continued to drift from behind Merry’s door. They all chewed their gum slowly as if challenging each other.

“Now, downstairs. Oll o’ ye!” Paddy said suddenly and slid from the chair. “Hurry now!”

((((((((((((<O>))))))))))))

Merry finished the prayer and picked up one of her big fluffy towels. Simon was still singing. Still looking up at the ceiling. She climbed the steps and wrapped the towel around him. He clutched it tightly and closed his eyes.

She picked up her gown from the floor and went into the bedroom. While she waited for him to come out of the bathroom, she put on her dress and collapsed into the chair beside the bed. She needed a stiff shot of bourbon.

The song ended and Simon came out the bathroom wrapped in the towel, carrying his clothes.

He had a very strange look on his face.

"Go on and get dressed," she told him tiredly. "I'll close my eyes."

By the time he was fully dressed again, she was asleep.

"Sister?"

He leaned over her and she jerked her head up.

"Oh. I'm sorry." She looked about. "I didn't mean to fall asleep."

"Is that it?" he asked her.

"What? Do you want more?" She squinted up at him in astonishment.

He backed away from her, shaking his head.

"Oh, yeah," she said, stifling a yawn. She stood up stiffly and stretched her back. "Your stuff."

She went pick up a double-sided knife with a white handle from the dresser.

"You'll carry this to the circle." She yawned again. "Be careful with it." She looked at the clock on the bedside table. Almost four-thirty. She had to hurry now.

"Now go on downstairs and tell the others to wait for me in the library. Hurry." She pushed him toward the door.

When he was gone, she collapsed against the door and let out a long breath. It had been even worse than she had expected.

After she gathered her wits a bit, she rushed into the bathroom. She had to get dressed. As she washed herself quickly and put on her uniform, she began to worry about Simon. It had been a terrible experience for him and she was afraid that she had scarred him for life. His screams still echoed in her head and then the sound of his voice singing the hauntingly beautiful hymn or whatever it had been had sent chills coursing up and

down her spine. But he had seemed OK afterwards. She would definitely have to have a long talk with him when this was all over. She rushed about the room throwing her materials for the ceremony in a canvas knapsack. She glanced at her reflection in the mirror and then jammed her helmet on her head before hurrying down the hall to the stairs.

((((((((((((<O>))))))))))))

She startled everyone in the library when she burst through the doors, rattling in her armor and almost dropping her bag on the floor. Mark Andrew was the first one up and came to help her.

"No. No." She backed away from him. "You can't touch me."

"Oh." He looked about and then waited as Lucio stood up from the sofa and yawned. Simon shut down the computer and came to join them. Louis Champlain pushed the recliner upright and blinked at them. Paddy snored on the hearth where he leaned against one of the big hounds. John Paul walked in behind slurping from a bottle of water.

"We have to hurry," she told him. "We lost some of our time."

Simon stood looking at her blandly.

"Simon?" She met his gaze. "Are you ready?"

He nodded. She looked at Mark Andrew and then frowned. He looked like he'd been beat. She turned her attention to Lucio and saw signs of a struggle on his face as well. He had a scratch on his left cheek, but Mark Andrew looked almost dazed and there were bruises visible on his jaw. His bottom lip looked swollen. What on earth had they been doing? But there was no time to ask now. She turned and hurried down the hall to the kitchen. The three Knights followed her.

She stopped at the table and laid her bag carefully on the wood.

"Now we will go across the meadow to the grove around the chapel. I have already laid out the circle there. Do you have your things?" Each of them held up their particular items. "Mark Andrew you are behind me, Lucio behind Mark, Simon at the rear. Let's go."

They let themselves out the back door and cut across the meadow directly. Merry was saying some sort of prayer as they went and occasionally sprinkling water or something on the grass on either side of

her from a bowl into which she dipped a brush with long bristles. The bag clunked on her shoulder. The full moon shone brightly on the meadow and they could see their way very clearly. There was not the least hint of a breeze and the sounds of night birds and insects filled the air.

Lucio kept glancing back at Simon as they walked along. He would need to have a long talk with the priest when this was over and as soon as time and circumstances permitted. The Italian was totally disturbed by what he had heard during the cleansing ceremony. If the priest intended to marry, he was desperately in need of advice. Lucio could just imagine what would happen on his wedding night! He had never given Simon much thought in that regard. They needed to talk. Simon was lost.

Mark Andrew was lost. He could not concentrate. The blows to his head had severely shaken him and then Simon's singing had unnerved him completely. He had been worried about Merry at first and now he was worried about the priest! What was the world coming to? Simon couldn't possibly get married! It would be… it would be… it just wouldn't be right! He would have to talk to him. Talk him out of this crazy idea. Simon was their priest. He couldn't go off to America looking for a wife. He would not allow it! And Merry! How could she have done such a thing? He would have to talk to her as well. She should have chosen Louis Champlain or even John Paul would have been a better choice. Poor Simon. Mark Andrew shivered in spite of the balmy air. Unnaturally hot for this time of the night. He picked up his pace a bit and closed the gap between himself and the 'magus'. He could smell the perfume drifting back from her, but then he wore the same scent. They all smelled like flowers. Like fucking flowers! His head swam and the moon wavered in front of him.

Simon's mind was drifting. He looked up at the moon and then watched a rabbit scamper away from their little procession in fright. He had the urge to follow the rabbit instead of Lucio. Why did the Knight of the Golden Eagle keep looking back at him? Did he think he was going to run off across the meadow? He felt like singing again, but he could hear the soft sound of Merry's prayers and knew this was not the time nor the place. An involuntary smile crinkled his eyes and then he concentrated his attention on the task at hand. This was not going to be as easy as it would seem. Certainly, whatever she was about to do would be very potent. She would need them to devote their energies to her purpose. He felt ashamed

of his earlier behavior. She had been right of course. It had really been no big deal or, at least, it shouldn't have been. He had not kept the proper perspective. He had almost failed her and that bothered him immensely. He would have to have a long talk with her when he had the chance and apologize. He must have scared her to death and then he had kissed her. Taken advantage of her at a very bad time. Terrible. Terrible. Just terrible, he smiled to himself.

Chapter Seventeen of Seventeen

Then shall they call upon me, but I will not answer

As soon as the four members of the ceremony had disappeared out the back door, John Paul motioned for the others to follow him and they slipped outside into the moonlight and started off across the meadow toward the chapel. Champlain had to hold on to the hilt of his broadsword to keep it from rattling on his belt. John Paul glanced at him as they waited to put some distance between them and the consecrated procession.

The priest had a very bad feeling about this. He had faith in his mother's abilities to perform the ritual, but he did not trust the Mad Arab. He knew the man had made some sort of connection with his mother and that the sorcerer possibly knew everything they were doing. He expected an attack from any side at any moment. He had been performing his own ceremonies in spite of his reluctance to do so and the contact he had made with al Sajek through the nine sorcerers in his head had left him almost physically ill.

'Mad Arab' certainly described the man accurately. He had searched the man's palace in a dream and had seen the tyranny he imposed on his servants. They were all scared to death of their master and rightly so, but he had been unable to see the magician directly. He was surrounded by protective spells and powers far too strong to penetrate. But now he, too, was protected from the sorcerer and the dreams he had been suffering no longer plagued him. The magician had been very clever to send him the dreams of his father, as much as he had abhorred them, at least he now understood Mark Ramsay a great deal more than he had before. His father was not the murdering monster that he imagined himself to be. It had been the Mad Arab all along. He would need to have a long talk with his father when this was all over. A long talk! First, he would have to figure out how to do that. Talking pained him terribly and he didn't understand why. It was as if the words were right there, ready to come out and then… they just stuck. The only time he could make them come out was when he was in some terrible state of distress. Had he always been this way? Perhaps he could just sit with him and maybe…

Paddy Puffingtowne had to hurry to keep pace with the big Knight. Champlain plodded along through the grass, surprisingly quiet for such a big man. Paddy had a bad feeling about this circle Merry had drawn in the woods. He wished she had made a better choice. The cellar would have been better. The library would have been better. Even Andy's parlor or the kitchen would have been better than out here in the open. He looked up at the clear sky where the moon was beginning to make its descent in the west. The stars in the east were burning brightly now in a last show before the rays of the sun began to make them fade into their daily slumbers. Even now there was a bare hint of gray above the trees where the sun would rise in another thirty minutes or so. But the unseelie court did not care if the sun was out or the moon. They preferred the dark, but they traveled by day as well.

((((((((((((<O>))))))))))))

Mark Andrew reached up to slap the bug or whatever it was away from his neck. Merry had brought them to her circle under the great oak trees and they were waiting now while she consecrated the ground and lit the incense and candles on the outside of the double circle etched in the soft earth. He shuddered to think that she must have spent quite a bit of time out here by herself drawing out the lines and intricate symbols within them. Where had he been? Anything could have happened to her. As soon as this thing was over and they were properly married, he would never let her out of his sight again. At least, not for long and not out of shouting distance. The Mad Arab still wanted her no doubt and he would be back for her. He'd had very little success against the sorcerer so far and now he owed him something very special. He had a burning desire to make him suffer terribly for murdering his brother all those years ago, yet he knew that this desire for vengeance was a sin. He pushed the thoughts from his mind and slapped at his neck again as something seemed to be crawling there. He redoubled his concentration on what Merry was doing.

She was inside the circle. She drew a dagger with a black hilt from her belt and stabbed it into the center of the circle. She then walked around the circumference of the inner circle, sprinkling it with water from the bowl

and muttering more prayers as she went. She hurried back to where they stood and pulled another censor from the canvas knapsack on the ground and lit the charcoal in it, fanning the small bricks to a red glow with her hand before tossing a handful of incense in the bowl. When she had a goodly amount of smoke issuing from the censor, she bade them kneel before her and she waved the smoke all around and over them, allowing it to cover them with its sweet fragrance.

"I will invoke the powers and they will come from all directions," she told them as she suffumigated them with spirituous vapors. "You are not to move, nor are you to say anything or do anything unless I direct you. And above all, do not be afraid. These are divine spirits and holy of God. Do not break the circle. Hold your swords in front of you with the points up and pay attention to what you see and hear. We will be looking for information concerning the whereabouts of Lucia Simone Sinclair-Dambretti, firstborne daughter of Lucio Apolonio Dambretti and Meredith Nichole Sinclair. Some or all of us will receive this information and you must remember everything. Stand up."

They all stood up and she went from one to another kissing them lightly on the lips and saying another brief prayer over each of them.

"Kiss each other and embrace as Brothers," she commanded and stepped back as they performed this part of the ritual somewhat awkwardly as they each held the articles necessary for their part of the ceremony. "Follow me and be careful not to step on any of the lines or symbols."

She led them around the double circle to the northern point. The circle had squares and triangles and pentagrams inscribed within it, along with several odd drawings. These were outlined in some sort of white crystals Mark Andrew thought was probably salt. They stepped carefully inside the circle and she placed Lucio in the east, Mark Andrew in the south and Simon in the west.

"Draw your swords in your right hand and place the points on the ground. When I raise my Staff, you will raise your swords."

They complied and she approached Lucio first and he was pleased.

"You are the symbol of the east and of the sunrise. Your function is knowledge. You are the Scribe. You will write in the book. Your element is air. Your color is white."

She went to face Mark Andrew. "You are the symbol of the south and of the fires within the earth. Your function is light. Your enemies are

darkness. Your element is fire. Your color is red."

She turned to Simon. "You are the symbol of the west. Your function is protection. You are the keeper of the circle. Your element is water. Your color is blue."

Merry took the black-handled knife from the center of the circle and went to close the circle in the north where they had entered. She came back to face Mark Andrew again and took the matches from his hand and the candles. She lit each candle with a fresh match and set one in the ground at the foot of each of her disciples and then one in the north. She returned to Mark and lit a bundle of sage in an abalone shell and placed it at his feet.

She leaned close to his ear and whispered to him. "If any of us should die, you will burn the bodies here in the circle. You understand and will obey."

Mark jerked his head back and frowned at her. Burn the bodies?!

"You understand, Brother!" she raised her voice.

He nodded. "I understand, Sister… Master."

She went back to Lucio and took the pen from him and placed it inside the book and laid it at his feet. "If you are to write something and you may write whatever you feel, do not sheath your sword. Stab it in the earth between your feet and do not let the hilt strike the ground. If the hilt of the sword touches the ground, you will throw yourself on it and pierce yourself through the heart. You understand and will obey."

Lucio blinked and frowned and then nodded. Why did he always get the dirty jobs?

She crossed over to Simon and placed the hilt of the white-handled dagger in his left hand and wrapped her hands around his. "Keep this dagger in your left hand. If anything should try to enter the circle, you will have to cut it down." She leaned close to whisper in his ear. "If anything should pull me from the circle, you will have to kill me with the dagger. You understand and will obey."

Simon's eyes grew wide. This was not part of the deal!

Merry drew back to look at him and then leaned forward again to whisper in his ear once more.

"You promised Mark Andrew that you would kill me before you would allow me to be taken. You must remember that."

He nodded. He remembered, but did not want to remember it.

“Then you will keep your promise, Brother,” she told him in a louder voice and he nodded again more slowly.

She went back to the center of the circle and looked at all three of them once more.

“These last secret instructions which I have given you as your Master will be the only instructions you may follow without my bidding. You understand and you all will obey.” All three nodded.

“I will now begin.”

The three Knights glanced at each other briefly. Each of them wondering what the others had been instructed to do.

((((((((((((<O>))))))))))))

John Paul found a place nearer the chapel where the tree trunks were thick enough to shield them from sight and yet allow them to see what was going on at Merry’s circle. He, along with Louis Champlain and Paddy sat down on the leaf-covered ground beneath the oaks and waited.

They could see the three Knights standing in the circle and Merry kneeling in the center, but they could not hear what was being said there. John Paul looked up at the dark skies through the limbs of the trees, narrowing his eyes sharply at the sight of several crows flying over toward the east. He motioned for his two companions to come closer to him and they scooted along until they were sitting on either side of him and just a little behind him. He raised his arms straight out to his sides and held his head back, closing his eyes. Paddy sat perfectly still watching the four people away under the trees surrounded by candlelight. It was an eerie sight. Champlain jumped when John Paul began to chant softly in a language he did not recognize. The priest was enclosing them in a protective spell… just in case.

((((((((((((<O>))))))))))))

Merry removed the hangman's rope that Lucio had been hung with in Ethiopia from her bag and laid it on the ground just south of the exact center of the circle. She took the Staff of Wisdom from within the pouch especially made for it inside her mantle and carefully unwrapped the linen cloth from around it and then stood up. Holding the Staff in her right hand and the cord in her left hand, she raised her arms to the sky and the three 'disciples' raised their swords. Lucio flinched when he recognized the bloodstained cord, but drew a deep breath and focused his attention on the invocation.

"O Lord God the Father Eternal, Who art seated upon the Cherubim and the Seraphim, Who lookest upon Earth and upon Sea; unto Thee do I raise my hands and implore Thine aid alone, Thou Who alone art the accomplishment of good works, Thou Who givest rest unto those who labour, Who humblest the proud, Who art the Author of Life and the Destroyer of Death; Thou art our rest, Thou art the Protector of those who invoke Thee; protect, guard, and defend me in this matter, and in this enterprise which I propose to carry out, O Thou Who livest, reignest, and abidest unto the Eternal Ages. Amen."

As she spoke these words, a faint humming sound began to vibrate the blades of the swords, making their hands tingle.

"O Lord God Almighty, be propitious unto me a miserable sinner, for I am not worthy to raise mine eyes unto heaven, because of the iniquity of my sins and the multitude of my faults. O pitying and merciful Father, who wouldest not the death of a sinner but rather that he should turn from his wickedness and live, O God have mercy upon me and pardon all my sins; for I unworthy entreat Thee, O Father of all Creatures, Thou Who art full of mercy and of compassion, by Thy great goodness, that Thou deign to grant unto me power to see and know these Spirits which I desire to behold and to invoke to appear before me and to accomplish my will. Through Thee Who art Conqueror, and Who art Blessed unto the Ages of the Ages. Amen."

The vibration grew until they could hear it in their ears and a blue glow enveloped the circle like a dome. Brilliant, but tiny, blue sparks filled the air beneath the dome, floating around them, ascending and descending the blades of the swords and traveling back and forth between the tips of the blades and the head of the Staff in Merry's hand.

"I beseech Thee, O Lord God, the All Powerful and the All Merciful, that Thou wilt deign to bless this Circle, and all this place, and all those

who are therein, and that Thou wilt grant unto us, who serve Thee, and rehearse nothing but the wonders of Thy law, a good Angel for our Guardian; remove from us every adverse power; preserve us from evil and from trouble; grant, O Lord, that we may rest in this place in all safety, through Thee, O Lord, Who livest and reignest unto the Ages of the Ages. Amen."

Outside the circle a blue mist began to rise under the trees, flowing toward the circle. In the mist could be seen the shape and form of the spiritual being she had called upon to protect them from evil. The form was of the mist and moved with the mist and when it reached the dome of blue light, it merged with the dome and enveloped the dome with mist momentarily before dissipating again.

"Do not be afraid, Brothers." Merry turned to each one of them in turn and pronounced these words to them, before continuing. "O Lord, be Thou unto me a Tower of Strength against the appearance and assaults of the Evil Spirits."

The sun had risen in the east, but it's ruddy rays did not penetrate under the canopy of the trees. Louis looked toward the sunrise with growing apprehension. He could see the sun, but the rays, which should have been falling beneath the limbs of the trees, were somehow blocked and did not enter into the gloom. John Paul looked up again and then held up one hand as if to prevent the Knight from speaking. The faint sound of howling reached their ears and a breeze stirred the topmost leaves in the trees.

Louis and Paddy looked up through the limbs and their hearts failed as they saw the blackest of black clouds hanging just above the oaks seemingly almost touching the tops of the trees. Within the cloud were blood red veins, crackling and undulating like lightning.

The howling, cackling sounds were emanating from this cloud.

((((((((((((<O>))))))))))))

"O ye Spirits, ye I conjure by the Power, Wisdom, and Virtue of the Spirit of God, by the uncreate Divine Knowledge, by the vast Mercy of God, by the Strength of God, by the Greatness of God, by the Unity of God;

and by the Holy Name of God Eheieh, which is the root, trunk, source, and origin of all the other Divine Names, whence they all draw their life and their virtue, which Adam having invoked, he acquired the knowledge of all created things," Merry continued the invocation unaware of the cloud hovering outside the protective circle.

Mark Andrew looked up through the blue haze of the dome at the black cloud with red streaks hanging just above the trees and wondered if Merry could see this. Surely this was not of God. He could see the wind rustling the treetops, but within the circle, the candles' flames burned unwavering. Not the slightest breath of air moved.

Merry turned slowly to face Lucio. "I conjure ye by the name Tetragrammaton Elohim, which expresseth and signifieth the Grandeur of so lofty a Majesty, that Noah having pronounced it, saved himself, and protected himself with his whole household from the waters of the deluge."

She turned again to face Mark Andrew. "I conjure ye by the Name of God El, Strong and Wonderful, which denoteth the Mercy and Goodness of His Majesty Divine, which Abraham having invoked, he was found worthy to come forth from the Ur of the Chaldeans."

She turned once more to face Simon. Mark Andrew cut his eyes toward Lucio and saw a figure standing behind him, wavering and shining white, outside the circle. A chill ran up his spine as Lucio turned his dark eyes in his direction, but was obviously looking at something behind him.

"I conjure ye by the most powerful Name of Elohim Gibor, which showeth forth the Strength of God, of a God All Powerful, who punisheth the crimes of the wicked, who seeketh out and chastiseth the iniquities of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth generation, which Isaac having invoked, he was found worthy to escape from the Sword of Abraham his Father!"

Her words had a profound effect on the priest. He hearkened back to the words he had spoken to his father concerning Abraham and the sacrifice of his son, Isaac. Simon swayed slightly under the pressure of the figure he felt approaching him from behind. He could see the white figure behind Lucio and the red form standing behind Mark Andrew. He knew that another such creature would be found directly behind him if he turned, but he would not turn.

Merry resumed her position facing north and then raised the cord and the Staff.

“O Lord God, Who art seated upon the Heavens, and Who regardest the Abysses beneath, grant unto me Thy Grace I beseech Thee, so that what I conceive in my mind I may accomplish in my work, through Thee, O God, the Sovereign Ruler of all, Who livest and reignest unto the Ages of the Ages. Amen.”

((((((((((((<O>))))))))))))

Al Hafiz sat straight up in his seat in the luxuriously appointed cabin of his jet and let out a blood-curdling scream before toppling onto the thick pile carpet. The flight attendant rushed forward to kneel beside him and turned him over on the floor. The magician’s head arched back on the carpet and his turban fell from his head. His eye rolled back in his head and he flung his arms out to either side. The terrified flight attendant scrambled backwards and hurried off to the cockpit to inform the pilot that something had happened to their master.

The Mad Arab found himself suspended in a black void with many shapeless forms howling and raging about him. Flashes of red and long streaks of orange broke the darkness and outlined the hideous spirits surrounding him. He had been pulled into the cloud of spirits without his consent and without warning. This was not possible. He righted himself and squinted around in the depths of the cloud, trying to determine what might have caused this unexpected development. The spirits did not seem to be angry or malicious toward him. Rather they seemed to be imploring him to help them.

He held out his arms and summoned the strength of the nine names of power, trying to extricate himself from this predicament. He knew that his body was still in the jet flying somewhere over Saudi Arabia by now. He had to get back there before the fools landed the plane somewhere he did not want to go. But the sorcerers enchained in his head laughed and screeched at him, mocking him. He had no power over them. A frayed and tattered spirit with deep hollow eyes loomed in front of him. It had no mouth, but he could hear its terrible voice.

“Thou hast called upon us, Master, and now we call upon thee. Payment is due and the time is at hand. Devote yourself to our misery and

aid us in our conquest of that one who dared awaken the Queen of the Abyss!"

The form dissipated and he looked down upon a blue circle below him. Inside the circle he could see Semiramis and her three Templars. So that was what this was all about! The unseelie court of the underworld wanted revenge on Adar for having awakened the Ancient One. At least they were blaming Ramsay and not him!

((((((((((((<O>))))))))))))

John Paul stood up suddenly and stared straight up at the dark cloud.

"Wizard!" he said and Louis was up in an instant with his sword drawn. Paddy stood with his hand on the hilt of his sword, swaying back and forth, frowning fiercely into the black sky.

"Aye, laddie!" he said after a moment. "And th' unseelie court. Tis an evil thing, it is."

((((((((((((<O>))))))))))))

"I conjure ye anew, O Spirits, by all the Names of God, and by all His marvellous work; by the heavens; by the earth; by the sea; by the depth of the Abyss, and by that firmament which the very Spirit of God hath moved; by the sun and by the stars; by the waters and by the seas, and all which they contain; by the winds, the whirlwinds, and the tempests; by the virtue of all herbs, plants, and stones; by all which is in the heavens, upon the earth, and in all the Abysses of the Shades."

The blue sparks within the dome over the circle began to dance about wildly. The blue mist covered the dome again and then rolled up into a sphere at the apex directly above her head. Long tendrils of blue began to filter upwards toward the dark cloud. Suddenly, Lucio, turned his sword down and stabbed the point in the earth between his feet. He picked up the small notebook, took out the pen and began to write furiously on the pages. Mark glanced at him and then returned his attention to the drama overhead.

Simon stood with his mouth agape also looking up at the blue light streaking upwards toward the cloud.

"I conjure ye anew, and I powerfully urge ye, O Demons, in whatsoever part of the world ye may be, so that ye shall be unable to remain in air, fire, water, earth, or in any part of the universe, or in any pleasant place which may attract ye; but that ye come promptly to accomplish our desire, and all things that we demand from your obedience."

Red streaks descended from the cloud from all sides and entwined themselves around the blue tendrils like snakes and the strands began to whip about furiously in a competition unfit for the eyes of man or beast. The tree branches swayed and twisted as the wind grew in strength and force outside the circle, but within, all remained perfectly still and silent except for the sound of Merry's voice and the unnaturally loud scratching of Lucio's pen on the paper.

"Here be the Symbols of Secret things, the standards, the ensigns, and the banners, of God the Conqueror; and the arms of the Almighty One, to compel the Aerial Potencies. I command ye absolutely by their power and virtue that ye come near unto us, into our presence, from whatsoever part of the world ye may be in, and that ye delay not to obey us in all things wherein we shall command ye by the virtue of God the Mighty One. Come ye promptly, and delay not to appear, and answer us with humility. I show to thee the rope of the hanged man!" Merry raised her voice and then let out an involuntary shriek as the cord stood upright in her hand as if some unseen power were tugging on it. Lucio's head jerked up and he almost dropped the notebook. He grabbed for it, dropped the pen and hit the hilt of his sword. The sword began to fall toward the ground and he flung himself bodily beneath it, catching it on his chest before it touched the earth. He climbed to his feet, shakily and repositioned the sword in the ground before retrieving the notebook and pen.

Mark Andrew slapped subconsciously at the irritating bug crawling on his shoulder and then almost screamed as he realized that it was not a bug, but the white braid with the silver earrings. It had dropped from his head and lay draped across his shoulder. It came away in his hand and he flung it to the ground in horror. Simon lowered his gaze from the sky and focused on the braided cord as it writhed about on the ground behind Merry. Mark's first instinct was to attack it with his sword, but remembered Merry's words. He was not to move from his station no matter what happened

except to burn their bodies?! He shuddered and closed his eyes briefly before tearing his attention from the thing on the ground and looking up again. A thin red line was creeping down the cord Merry held in her hand. She held onto the cord and continued her words.

((((((((((((<O>))))))))))))

John Paul collapsed onto the ground in a cross-legged position and tuned his face up to the sky.

"I conjure and pray ye, O ye Angels of God, and ye Celestial Spirits, to come unto mine aid; come and behold the Signs of Heaven, and be my witness before the Sovereign Lord, of the disobedience of these evil and fallen Spirits who were at one time your companions." His voice startled Champlain and Paddy and they looked down at him frowning. He looked at them and made a motion for them to sit beside him. "Obey ye, Obey ye, behold the Symbols and Names of the Creator; be ye gentle and peaceable, and obey in all things that we shall command ye."

The wind howled about the three seated figures, but did not touch them. It was as if they were inside a tiny cocoon, protected from the fury of the storm that raged outside.

"In the Name of Adonai Elohim Tzabaoth Shaddai, Lord God of Armies Almighty, may we successfully perform the works of our hands, and may the Lord be present with us in our heart and in our lips." John Paul continued to aid his mother in her endeavors. "I conjure, I address, and I exorcise ye, that ye may approach unto and come before the Throne of God, the Living and the True, and before the Tribunal of the judgment of His Majesty, and before the Holy Angels of God to hear the sentence of your condemnation."

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Al Hafiz focused his energies on the cord that Semiramis held in her up-stretched hand. It took all his effort to penetrate the blue shield of

protection surrounding her. The thread of his power took shape and traveled slowly down the cord toward her hand as the protecting guardian battled with the spirits above the circle. The unseelie court was distracting the guardian just enough to allow him to accomplish this monumental task. Her magick was great indeed and caused him to smile wickedly. Not in a thousand years had he encountered such strength, such challenge. He drew a deep breath and urged the thread on. If he could contact her directly, he could pull her free of the circle. The dome would collapse and he could destroy all three of the bothersome Templars at once. His anger at having been brought here against his wishes, receded in the face of the possibility of such a great triumph.

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Lucio continued to scribble in the notebook. He seemed oblivious to all other things around him. Mark Andrew watched in horrid fascination as the red line approached Merry's fingers.

"Simon!" Mark shouted suddenly and the priest jerked his attention from the white braid, which had unraveled itself on the ground. It now lay in two separate pieces. Each with an ornament at one end. He frowned at Mark Andrew and then looked up. When he saw the red about to make contact with Merry's hand, he bounded forward to her side, carefully avoiding the lines and marks within the circle and reached up with the white-handled dagger to slash at the red tendril as it wound around and down the hangman's cord. The red line jerked back up into the air above the dome and Lucio cried out in pain. The knife had also made a cut in the cord and blood now flowed from a cut on the Knight of the Golden Eagle's throat. Simon looked at him in fascination and back at the cord. Merry did not turn her attention away from her conjurations. Lucio put his hand to his neck and wiped away the blood. The wound appeared to be serious, but not severe, he went back to his writing.

Mark Andrew drew a deep breath of relief. So Simon was to protect Merry with the knife. That was good. He nodded subconsciously. But why was it hurting Lucio? That was not so good.

((((((((((((<O>))))))))))))

Al Hafiz snapped back when the thread was cut and lost his balance. It felt as if he had been pulling on a rubber band that had suddenly broken in his grasp. He righted himself and felt the anger rising in him again. He regained his control quickly and drew on his power to direct the unseelie court. Another two lines of red worked at the top of the dome like electrical charges, seeking a way to enter the circle.

((((((((((((<O>))))))))))))

Merry let go of the cord and it stayed in the air suspended above her head. She turned to face Mark Andrew and took a piece of paper from the cuff of her long-sleeved under-shirt and held it up toward him.

"I conjure thee, O Creature of Fire, by Him who removeth the Earth, and maketh it tremble, that thou burn and torment these Spirits, so that they may feel it intensely, and that they may be burned eternally by thee." She stepped forward and lit the paper in the flame of the candle at his feet. When the paper had been consumed, she stepped back to the center and faced north again. Two more tendrils of red slipped from the apex of the dome and began to descend the cord she no longer held.

Simon's eyes searched the ground in a panic for the white strands of hair, but they were no longer there. Where were they? Where were they?

((((((((((((<O>))))))))))))

John Paul stopped speaking, lowered his head and stared intently into the dark storm under the trees. Something was coming toward them.

"Holy Mother of God!" Champlain cried out next to him and John Paul held up his hand to silence him.

The three of them sat holding their collective breaths as something, which appeared to be a snake approached them on the ground. When it was near enough, they could see that it was long and white and divided into two segments by silver devices.

John Paul stretched out his hand and the thing came to wrap itself around his hand. He stood up suddenly and Champlain and Paddy stood with him. Champlain stared at the cord in amazement. He recognized the silver devices as the ornaments Mark Ramsay had worn in his hair for almost forty years now. The two strands, connected into one long cord, hung from the prophet's hand. John Paul began to walk forward slowly toward the circle where his mother and her three disciples still worked beneath the protective blue dome. Louis and Paddy stayed close to the prophet as he moved forward. When they were close to the circle, they could hear Merry's voice plainly above the storm that raged about them, yet did not touch them.

"Be ye accursed, damned, and eternally reproved, and be ye tormented with perpetual pain," she was saying.

((((((((((((<O>))))))))))))

Al Hafiz was struck with a blinding pain behind his eye sockets. He fought for control and re-concentrated his efforts. The red threads of his power dropped from the bottom of the hangman's cord and dangled above Semiramis' head.

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Simon rushed to her side again and slashed at the things with the dagger, but they twitched and wiggled and jerked away from the blade. He could not strike them. He began to scream something in French as he jumped as high as he could, over and over, attempting to reach the writhing red streamers. The battle between the blue swirls of the guardians and the red powers of the unseelie court raged on above the circle. One of the red

threads inside the dome wrapped itself around Simon's wrist and pulled him up off the ground. Mark shouted at him, but did not dare move out of his place. He looked at Lucio, but the Italian was still writing in the damnable notebook.

Simon was lifted to the top of the dome by one hand and then dropped to the ground. He fell in a heap beside Merry and while he was down, the other tendril entwined itself in her hair.

"If ye not obey immediately the command of Him Who maketh the Universe to tremble," she shouted as the thing began to lift her by her hair. "By these Names and in virtue of these Names, the which being named and invoked all creatures!" She reached her free hand up to take hold of the red streamer to take the pressure off her hair before continuing and the thing wrapped itself around her wrist. "Obey and tremble with fear and terror! These Names which… can turn aside…" She faltered as the thing began to lift her from the ground by one hand. Simon climbed to his feet and looked about for the white-handled dagger he had lost in the fall. He still held his sword in his right hand. He wrapped his free arm around her waist as she was pulled upwards. "Lightning and thunder, which will utterly make you perish, destroy and banish you!" Simon was being lifted along with her. Merry cried out in pain as the weight on her wrist increased.

Mark Andrew was having trouble staying in his place. He tried hard to resist the urge to help Simon in his struggles. He watched as the second red thread snapped and whipped around inside the circle and drew back his head as the thing seemed to zero in on him. It whipped about in front of his face and then suddenly wrapped itself around his neck. He brought his sword down reflexively and slashed at the thing. When the blade struck the strand, it yanked him forward and he stepped out of his place. The thread whipped back away from him and the blue dome vanished. The wind struck them full force, nearly knocking them from their feet. Lucio staggered forward and dropped his notebook again. The circle of protection was broken!

"Dammit!" the Knight of Death shouted when he suddenly heard a multitude of hideous voices screaming his name and his titles. They were after him! It was just as well, he'd fight them on his own terms. "The circle's broken!" he shouted against the wind.

Mark Andrew ran forward and raised the golden sword to slash at the red tendril as it continued to pull both Merry and Simon toward the black

cloud swirling furiously above them. Merry screamed again as the blade of the sword missed the tendril, carried him around and almost cut Lucio's head off in the process. The Italian ducked and came up with his own sword, but the thing was too high now for either of them to reach. Simon was hanging onto Merry's waist, but he was slipping.

"Hold on!" Mark Andrew shouted to the priest and then grabbed his legs to keep him from slipping further. Simon dropped his sword and grabbed onto Merry's body with both arms. She kicked her legs and screamed at them to let go.

Lucio grabbed hold of Simon and began to climb up Mark's body like an acrobat with the intention of getting high enough to cut the red thing holding her with his sword, but the added weight was too much. Simon slipped down suddenly and fell on Lucio in a heap. In his panic, Mark Andrew tried to stand on them both to reach her feet.

John Paul came running toward them shouting something unintelligible. Mark's attempt failed and he toppled from his precarious pose atop Simon and Lucio as John Paul leapt into the air and flung the white cord at his mother's feet. The cord wrapped around her leg and then worked its way quickly up her body as the five Knights and the clurichaun stood beneath her in the raging storm. Shielding their faces from the onslaught of sand, leaves and small pebbles carried on the wind, trying to see what was happening to her.

Merry screamed once more and then she was plummeting toward them. The Knights came together below her and tried to catch her, but ended up sprawled in all directions on the ground. Paddy ran about from one to another of them, trying to help them up as the howling and cackling cloud began to descend upon them in a whirling vortex.

John Paul groped about on the ground, half-blinded by the blowing debris. He came up with the Staff of Wisdom his mother had dropped and got to his knees just as the cloud of raging spirits covered them.

"These Names then are Aleph, Beth, Gimel, Daleth, He, Vau, Zayin, Cheth, Teth, Yod, Kaph, Lamed, Mem, Nun, Samekh, Ayin, Pe, Tzaddi, Koph, Resh, Shin, Tav. By these secret Names, therefore, and by these signs which are full of Mysteries, we curse ye, and in virtue of the power of the Three Principles, Aleph, Mem, Shin, we deprive ye of all office and dignity which ye may have enjoyed up till now; and by their virtue and power we relegate you into a lake of sulphur and of flame, and unto the deepest depths

of the Abyss, that ye may burn therein eternally for ever. Amen. Amen. Amen!" John Paul held up the Staff of Wisdom in the swirling blackness and finished the curse his mother had begun.

The cloud and the spirits within it, along with the wind, disappeared almost instantly, leaving them blinking in the bright morning sun, which shown in reddish rays slanting under the trees. John Paul collapsed onto his face on the ground. Champlain was the first one up and went to kneel beside him, lifting him from the ground and standing him on his feet. Paddy and Simon helped Lucio to his feet and Mark Andrew picked up Merry who remained unconscious in the aftermath of the horrifying experience. They stood swaying and blinking at each other.

"What the hell happened?" Lucio looked around in astonishment.

"Andy moved," Paddy told him by way of explanation and shrugged.

Mark Andrew shook his head and then unceremoniously slung Merry's body across his shoulder before starting back toward the house. He'd had enough of spells and magick.

Lucio dusted himself off and then went to look for the notebook. He found it lying against the roots of one of the great old oaks. He stuffed it under his belt and went back to retrieve Mark's sword and his own from the ground. The Italian jammed his helmet back on his head and picked up Merry's helmet. He stood looking about again in wonder and then hurriedly followed after Mark Andrew. He seemed to have missed a great deal during his ghost writing episode. The circle was in shambles. The lines and symbols had been trampled and eradicated by their struggles and all of Merry's equipment had been blown away by the storm. He remembered very little of the ceremony except for the horrifying moment when he had almost allowed the hilt of his sword the touch the ground. He vaguely remembered something slashing his neck and the blood from the wound was still fresh on his hands and his surcoat. It seemed that only the Knight of the Golden Eagle had shed blood, but it was only right. He silently thanked God that he had not had to try the suicide trick Mark Andrew had attempted so long ago.

Champlain helped John Paul limp back across the meadow.

Simon kicked at the hangman's rope now lying on the ground at his feet. He closed his eyes and thanked God that John Paul had possessed the foresight to follow them. He wondered if he would have been able to carry out Merry's instructions and fulfill the promise he had made to Mark

Andrew. He doubted it seriously. He glanced at Paddy and then reached to pick up his helmet and Mark Andrew's. The clurichaun smiled at him and then jerked his head toward the house, offering him a stick of gum. Simon declined. They followed the others more slowly.

Simon looked away across the meadow at the glorious sunrise and began to sing again in Latin, praising the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost. His voice drifted across the serene landscape adding a surreal quality to the beautiful summer morning.

Finished.

Quatotations taken from King James Version Bible Old Testament Books: Daniel, I & 11 Kings, I & II Chronicles, I & II Samuel, Ezekial. New Testament Books: The Revelation of St. John, Jude, Mark, Luke, Matthew. The Ars Notaria: Lapis Philosophorum, The Golden Tractate of Hermes, The Pretiosissimum Donum Dei.

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